

2022.04.03 5th Sunday in Lent

Gospel Reading

John 12: 1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.)

Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

A Word of God that is still speaking,

Thanks be to God.

Thoughts about an Imperfect Life and Faith

“We are fragile.”

Jesus speaks the words no one wanted to admit he was not always going to be around. “Oh, don’t say that” so many of us have said to a loved one who speaks the truth about the fragility of life. Perhaps we get uncomfortable because it reveals the precious nature of the present moment, laying bare the beauty and horror of it all. The indescribable pain we know we will one day face invades our senses like a pervasive perfume, inescapable.

It is one of this pervasive moment that we find Jesus gathering six days for the Passover meal in the Gospel of John. They have dined at Lazarus’s house before, Jesus, Lazarus, Mary, Martha, Judas, and the other disciples.

And I suspect they are thinking of the last time they gathered in Bethany just a short time before. They are remembering Jesus’ meeting Mary and Martha, in all their desperate grief, mingling his tears with theirs. Jesus calling Lazarus out of the grave and commanding that the cloths covering his face, his hands, his feet be removed. And finally forcing Jesus into hiding, knowing that this wondrous act of raising Lazarus was also disruptive in ways that were somehow now too threatening in a fragile world where the separation between life and death had always seemingly been so clear before.

And so it was that Mary may have been the only disciple in the room who truly comprehended what was to come in the next days. She must have known this day was at hand. She had listened when the other disciples had not. She, who often sat at Jesus' feet now anointed them. And while one would be hard pressed to say that Mary was comfortable with this certainty that Jesus would die, as she anoints his feet, clearly, she is foreshadowing what custom would soon entail anyway. And more than that, of course? Jesus speaks out loud this truth that Mary had bought this costly perfume for just this purpose: to anoint him on the day of his burial.

Indeed, one wonders if poor Judas saw it at all. Or if, instead, his heart was just so bent on only one way of seeing, so closed to what might be, to what could be, that his only possible reaction was his gut response to the extravagance of the gesture which was that so much better good could have come from the money which would have been gained from just selling it and giving it away. And it is not as though Judas is necessarily wrong, of course, but in his way of thinking— he is missing the moment altogether at this fragile time, in this fragile world, where that sense of new life lives with Lazarus and impending death Jesus hangs heavily in the perfumed air.

The sense of the fragility of life is never more present than when death is called to mind. We are living through a pandemic in which now everyone knows someone whose life was cut short by the virus, more than 6.1 million people have died of COVID 19 around the world.

I know than most of us have said at one time or another in the past two years. “I’ve been really rethinking what is important, how I spend my time, what I want to spend my precious time and energy on.” We are learning a hard lesson that life is so much more fragile than we thought. And perhaps we can also acknowledge that if we take our life seriously, then our hope lies in the resurrection story. That at this table where we gather for a meal, we acknowledge the limited nature of our lives and breathed in deeply the fragrance of vulnerability? That this table and this font, are symbols of not only our frailty but our hope that our lives are good enough.

AMEN