

Sermon: Love Has Its Reasons
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Well, we are in our 5th Sunday in the Lenten season. Can you believe that? The youth group has been doing pushups every day, and boy, am I ready to be done with that. And Tim, are you ready to leave the Whole30 for a little bit? And others who have given up chocolate: is that as rewarding as it sounds? Perhaps some of us are getting weary of this season of Lent, and with our Scripture text today, we are now moving full speed ahead towards what we know will be the frenzy of Holy Week between Palm Sunday and Easter.

But our Scripture today says to us, “Wait. Slow down. Smell the fragrant oil-- maybe it has the scent of lavender or jasmine or myrrh. Feel Mary’s hands anointing your tired, weary feet. Relax. Sit down. Listen closely. What inside you is waiting to be blessed? Receive the blessing. Let yourself be cared for.”

There are many ways to show we care for one another, from exchanging gifts to spending time together to affirming each other with words and actions, to physical touch. When I was a kid and would get sick, my mom would make me a peanut-butter and banana sandwich on saltine crackers...and that was how I knew she cared. My grandma taught me how to make bread, and my other grandma taught me how to make her super-secret pie crust recipe. With certain friends, we exchange consensual hugs as a sign of how we love each other. These are all ways of showing that we care for each other, and all these actions have sensual aspects to them. Not sexual--it is a great tragedy of USAmerican culture, in my opinion, and particularly in USAmerican Christianity--that sensuality has been too often conflated with sexuality. These are different words with different meanings. Sensuality has to do with the senses, like the taste of the peanut-butter and banana sandwich and the feel of kneading bread and crimping pie dough and the warmth of exchanging body heat with another person in a hug. Today we are going to talk about bodies, and how we care for them. Our Scripture today is a sensual story, and touches on the sacred space in caring for people at the end of life.

Read Scripture: John 12:1-8

As Jesus visits Bethany one more time before he goes to Jerusalem where the Passion will take place, Mary performs an act of great love for Jesus. She literally pours out her heart at his feet, using precious perfume to anoint him, wiping them dry with her hair. Mary shows us plainly that there are risks involved in caring, and sometimes the risks are worth it.

Now, remember that Mary of Bethany, a character distinct from all the other Marys we read about, is the sister of Martha and Lazarus. In the gospel of Luke, Martha and Mary have some sort of conflict while Jesus is visiting their home. In the gospel of John chapter 11, Mary and Martha are united in conflict against Jesus, who they blame for not being in Bethany with them to prevent their brother from dying. Some of you may also remember that the shortest verse in the whole Bible is in John 11, where it simply reads, "Jesus wept." The occasion for Jesus' weeping was grief over Lazarus' death...and then Jesus heads to Bethany. When he arrives Mary can barely speak to Jesus out of the depth of her sadness, but Martha has no trouble piping up, "Where were you? If you really loved him, and if you really loved us, you'd do something about this!" I can almost hear her pleading as well as shouting in grieving anger, "Why didn't you come earlier? Can I even believe in you any more?"

And Jesus, in true Jesus fashion, commands Lazarus to get up and come out of the tomb. Now, it should be noted that this story is sensual as well, with the sensation of tears, the wailing and crying of mourning, the hot anger flaring up in the belly...and Martha's warning to Jesus that it's been a few days since the tomb was sealed and Lazarus' body probably doesn't smell so good.

Jesus tells Martha to trust him, and Martha, having something to say, confesses, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." This is how Martha witnesses to God's glory and life-giving power, by confessing her faith and watching as her brother walks out of the tomb, still covered in grave clothes.

But Mary...that's another story. Mary, who sat at Jesus' feet and listened to his preaching, who the gospel of Luke presents as a perfect disciple, who also wept over her brother's death...Mary doesn't share a verbal confession of her faith. But that's only chapter 11...

Unlike the stories of a woman anointing Jesus presented in Mark, Matthew and Luke, the gospel of John names Mary of Bethany as the woman who brings the perfume, and kneels, and anoints. This gospel puts this profound act of faith, this intuitive and extravagant response to the grace of God in the character of a woman whose brother had just descended to the grave and arose again. This action may be read by some as Mary looking back, acting out of gratitude for Jesus' powerful resurrection of her brother. As one commentator puts it, "Her action dramatizes what words cannot express— what it means for Lazarus to be restored and reintegrated into the family." (NIB) Or it may also be read as Mary looking forward, knowing that, as the gospel of John tells it, this giving of life is the reason the religious and political leaders want Jesus dead. Bethany is on the edge of Jerusalem, so they were geographically near to the time of reckoning: and everybody knew it. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, Jesus was on "the religious right's most wanted list" and everyone was just waiting for something to happen.

Or perhaps it's both/and. I wonder if Mary sees what's going on with Jesus. She has a relationship with him; indeed, the home of Martha and Mary and Lazarus in Bethany is probably the closest thing to home Jesus had, as it is written "the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." He visits there often, embraces the smallness of domesticity for a while before emerging again to teach and preach to thousands of people. And Mary knows what's going on. She knows what it is like when someone is near death; indeed, she just went through that with her own brother. She has heard the death rattle in Lazarus' chest, and she has witnessed his chest stop rising and falling in that familiar inhale/exhale pattern. She has felt Lazarus' hands and feet grow cold. You know when someone is near death.

And what does Mary do, as she takes the risk of caring for Jesus, as she treats his body with tenderness and anoints him with fragrant oil? In this action of care, she confesses her faith. She responds to the extravagant and gracious gift of God with overflowing abundance. Her heart breaks open in love. The text says the smell of the perfume wafted throughout the whole house--can you imagine how that smells? Gratitude and love and joy?

And, of course, someone breaks the spell. Judas criticizes Mary: "Why is she wasting all of that? That is worth 300 denarii! That's a year's wages that could have been given to the poor and she is wasting that!" And because it's hard to figure the value of 300 denarii today, think to yourself what a year's wage is for you, or think of the median salary for King County: \$86,000. Mary just spent \$86,000 on perfume to anoint Jesus! Think of all the good it could have been put to!

Judas' question about the poor is not uttered out of selflessness, but the gospel tells us that Judas kept the money bags for the group of disciples and thus would have control over how and when the money is distributed. Instead of taking this job in humility, Judas, John informs us, was rather greedy. The only thing worse than not caring for the poor is *pretending* to care.

But, my question for Judas is: "you were *counting*?" There was an incredible act of reverence right in front of your face and you were *counting* how much money would have gone into the communal purse and *you* would have overseen? For real, you wonder if Mary's gracious gift is necessary?

But no matter the context John's gospel is making us aware of in parenthetical statements about Judas' morality, the question of those on the margins remains. And what church doesn't honestly live in this tension: do we spend money for acts of worship, or do we give everything to those in need? But this is not a simple either/or question. Having accompanied Jesus on his way to Jerusalem throughout our Lenten journey, we should know that Jesus rarely entertains questions with simple, straightforward answers. Instead, as H. Stephen Shoemaker writes in the Feasting on the Word commentary, "Here is

Jesus' sharp, clear defense of this woman—and his defense of all whose voices and gifts are stifled by the church.” (FOTW) In his defense of Mary's loving, embodied way of gratefully worshipping and yet prophetically looking forward to Jesus' death, Jesus welcomes her gift...and even emulates it in the next chapter, where he teaches his disciples to wash each other's feet. Judas' frugality, which may be born of greed, obligates no explanation from Mary in this economy of grace.

But of course, before we hate on Judas too much (because, if you read the next few chapters in John, he really is in trouble), we must turn to ourselves. When acts of grace and gratitude surround *us*, do *we* notice? Or are we too busy counting? When the whole house smells of the rich perfume of love, are we too busy opening all the windows and doors and getting that stench out? (those with allergies, I feel your pain!) When dinner is interrupted by someone expressing their deepest feelings of love and awe, are we just hoping to get back to chowing down?

Annie Dillard, in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, writes, "The answer must be, I think, that beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there."

And being there, or showing up, is what Jesus teaches us to do. Barbara Brown Taylor tells it this way: "Jesus gave [the disciples] things they could get their hands on, things that would require them to get close enough to touch one another. In the case of the meal, he gave them things they could smell and taste and swallow. In the case of the feet, he gave them things to wash that were attached to real human beings, so that they could not bend over them without being drawn into one another's lives...Read the Bible commentaries and they will tell you that the foot washing in John's gospel is an eschatological sign of Jesus's descent into flesh before his exaltation to God's right hand, or a symbolic representation of first-century baptismal theology. But I will tell you this. After years of watching bodies being dug out of craters in Manhattan and caves in Afghanistan, after the body counts coming from southeast Asia, Gaza and Iraq, most of us could use a reminder that God does

not come to us beyond the flesh but in the flesh, at the hands of a teacher who will not be spiritualized but who goes on trusting the embodied sacraments of bread, wine, water, and feet.” (An Altar in the World, 44)

The challenging and awkward truth about this passage is that Mary is not the perfect disciple. But neither is Judas. Truly, all of us contain both tendencies in us. We long for power and positions of influence, and yet we can also feel extreme gratitude and seek worship that engenders pure love. We have been listening to Jesus teach and preach during his many travels and yet we still don't get it; and yet at times, we get a glimpse of the nearness of God's kingdom and react with worship, risking accusations of wastefulness or shortsightedness. We are all living in that tension, embodying the both/and. This is one of the complexities, one of the risks, of following the way of Jesus Christ.

Again, H. Stephen Shoemaker: “We live our lives in the shadow of the cross, but we also live in the presence of the risen Christ. So here is an invitation to daily companionship with Jesus, at the Table, in extravagant acts of compassion and generosity, in moments of worship. All this in a world which lives by a mind-set of scarcity, rather than a mind-set of abundance, and so tempts us to close in and give little. All this in a world whose violence and cruelty crucify people every day.” (FOTW)

So, why does Mary spend a whole year's salary on perfume with which to anoint Jesus? You tell me. Love has its reasons.

Last year during Holy Week, I was blessed by being able to accompany my grandpa, Hugh Wilcoxon, as he died. I was in class in Nashville when I got the call from my mom that he was getting close to the end, and she asked if I could go to Illinois. My mom couldn't leave until after my brother finished school, putting them a few hours behind me. I realized, miraculously, that Holy Week did not depend on me and that this was where I was supposed to be. So, I left class, grabbed some clothes and drove my Prius to Illinois. I arrived at the nursing home to find my grandma at grandpa's bedside. Before my grandpa died, his skin became pale, almost gray, and cool and wrinkled. He had trouble

breathing on his own, and when he inhaled and exhaled, you could hear what some call “the death rattle,” part of the normal process of bodies beginning to work slower. At my grandpa’s bedside, I remember wondering if Mary sensed that Jesus’ body would soon become pale and cool and his lungs would begin the process of shutting down their tireless work. I think she knew, because then she knelt at his feet and anointed him.

As my grandpa passed on, I combed his thin white hair with my fingers, used a soft washcloth to clean his face and pat his brow. I rubbed lotion on his once-strong farm-country hands, now weak and still. I sang to him the songs that he had taught me to sing in the tiny Nazarene chapel in my mom’s hometown.

“Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound...”

“there is a balm in Gilead...”

“On Christ the solid rock I stand...”

“what wondrous love is this, o my soul...”

And he died.

So why do we do these things? Bring cut flowers as a gift, when they will just wither? Spend all we have on perfume for a beloved one? Take hours and hours of our time rehearsing a song, or a sermon, that will be over quickly? Why do we wash the bodies of those close to death?

Love has its reasons.

And that’s enough for me.

Amen.