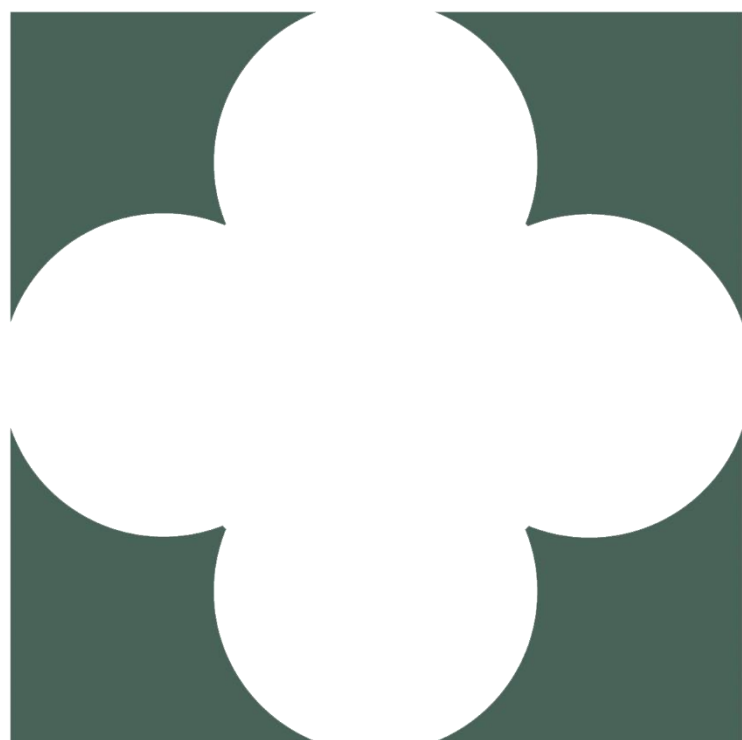


Tenderness and Beauty

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John 12:1-8

John 12:1-8 (NRSV)

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."

Since I was a child growing up in church, I have loved the sensory experiences of worship. The way my footsteps crunch slightly on that plush red church-carpet. The sound of the choir singing and the organ thrumming. The feel of the hymnal heavy in my hands and the sight of family friends and the smell of the flowers, even though they sometimes would make me sneeze. And then, once a month on the first Sunday, the taste of the pillowy white bread and grape juice as the gathered body of Christ shared communion.

Our senses interpret the world around us. Contrary to the ponderings of certain ancient Greek philosophers, we are not just "minds" wandering around wearing flesh. Our bodies contribute to our sense of self, and our sense of community and belonging. Our bodies even affect how we worship!

That's not always how bodies were understood, though. For much of Protestant Christian history, bodily experience was understood as lesser than intellectual experience, and bodily pleasure was disdained. For some, this led to what we today call "purity culture," the pressure to abstain from sensual, and sexual pleasure, until one is married. Many things could lead to "impurity" and send someone down the wrong path, even the taste of something delicious or the smell of perfume or the feel of a soft article of clothing. The Church as a whole has not been kind to bodies.

That's why this Scripture is so important: because Mary's act is a deeply embodied one. The story of a woman anointing Jesus and the disciples looking on disapprovingly takes place in all four gospels. In Matthew and Mark, the woman is unnamed, and she anoints Jesus' head, an act reminiscent of Israel's kings and language surrounding the Messiah (which literally means "the anointed.") This act of anointing Jesus' head also resonates with a mounting sense of danger as we near the ends of the gospels; we can think of Nathan the prophet's dangerous act of anointing a youth named David while Saul was still the king.

But in John, Mary of Bethany is the woman who anoints Jesus, and this version is particularly sensual. In this pericope, Mary is presented as the ideal disciple and as a person of action. Just listen to all the verbs in our story: she kneels, she holds, she anoints, she wipes the sweet oil away with her hair. The fragrance of perfume pervades the house. Mary anoints not Jesus' head, but his feet because that's what discipleship is all about, since only a chapter later in this gospel, Jesus kneels down to wash his disciples' feet.

Rachel Held Evans wrote that the woman who anoints Jesus finds herself "in the untraditional position of priest and prophet. In the upside-down Kingdom of Jesus, it makes perfect sense. Anointing the feet...models service, discipleship, and love. In this sense, John's account is more personal and raw. In a culture in which a woman's touch was often forbidden, Mary dares to cradle the feet of Jesus in her hands and spread the oil across his ankles and toes with the ends of her hair. Rather than measuring out a small amount of oil, Mary breaks the jar and lets it all pour out. She's all-in, fully committed, sparing no expense. The oil she may have been reserving for her own burial, or the burial of a loved one, has been poured out generously, without thought of the future."

Why extravagance? Why break the whole jar and use it all, every last drop of the expensive perfume? Why now? Why her? Why, why, why?

If we zoom out to map John's gospel as a whole, we find that the gospel takes place over about 3 years, between Jesus' baptism to Jesus' resurrection and ascension. Each year, Jesus celebrates the Passover festival in Jerusalem, as it was his custom as part of the Jewish community. The

author of John portrays Jesus as circling Jerusalem as though it is inevitable, visiting for the Passover each year, then continuing his ministry elsewhere...then coming back again the next year. This passage takes place on Jesus' third, and final, visit to Jerusalem, the city where, we know having the benefit of time and story, his earthly life will end.

But we wonder, what is different about THIS year in Jerusalem for Jesus and his disciples? The gospel of John says it has everything to do with that family in Bethany, and with Jesus' friend Lazarus. In John 11, we read that some people with religious and political authority heard about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead and were so alarmed that this initiated the plot to arrest and kill him.

And so, as Jesus tells his disciples, Mary's silent act of service is really a witness to Jesus' identity and mission in the world: this anointing is for his burial. William G. Carter writes this in the Feasting on the Word commentary, "If, as Jesus suggests, she purchased it for the day of his burial, the gift was not only six days premature, but unnecessary after his resurrection. Curiously, Jesus does not take issue with the temporary nature of the gift. He declares it appropriate in that moment, particularly in light of his impending death. He is gracious enough to receive it with gratitude." Carter goes on to say, "Lots of extravagant gifts are put into the air, where they soon evaporate. A church choir labors to prepare an intricate anthem, and three minutes later it is gone. The teacher prepares the lesson, stands to deliver, and then class is adjourned. Mourners provide large arrangements of flowers to honor those whom they grieve. Saints donate large sums of money for their congregations to spend. Why do they do this? Love has its reasons."

And love did have its reasons that day, and many days since. Perhaps Mary's profound gratitude for the restoration of her brother to life could only be expressed in an equally profound act, throwing practicality out the window and operating on pure extravagant generosity.

I know that in my family, and perhaps in some of yours, and in general USAmerican culture, practicality and efficiency are highly prized. We want to get things done as fast as we can. We want answers. We want to understand. We want the most direct route. Time is money and money is

time, and neither is to be wasted. The truth behind those wants is really a desire for control.

For us today, we may hear that orientation toward practicality in Judas' question: "Jesus, aren't you going to stop her?! Think of what we could do with that money! This is incredibly wasteful and irresponsible!" We may think, "well, he's really got a point." And yes, he does have a point. And I know I, and I bet many of you, can relate to trying to balance the tension between beautiful and meaningful ritual and money spent in benevolence. I definitely don't know any church that is not struggling with that tension! Not in this economy!

But sometimes extravagant generosity fits the moment. Sometimes beauty is the right thing to prioritize, even if it seems unnecessary to others. Sometimes tenderness shown in a simple act like Mary's is worth more than we can comprehend.

Even just last week when we wondered together about the parable of the man who had two sons, we encountered a moment of extravagant celebration. When the younger son returned from his travels away from home, broke and dejected and ashamed, the father threw an extravagant party. And in the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, the shepherd who recovered the one sheep and the woman who recovered her missing coin, they threw parties, too!

And think about the older son, out in the field, finding out his dad threw a party for his reckless younger brother. He didn't understand! He said, "why did you throw HIM a party, and not me? I'm the one who's been here with you, I didn't waste my inheritance! Why do you throw HIM a party?"

Well, because sometimes extravagant generosity is the only way to mark an important moment in the restoration of God's family.

Sometimes self-care seems like extravagance. Or date night with your loved one. Or a family vacation. Or even a day off from work can seem extravagant. "But I don't really need it," we say, "but others don't have days off," "but I'm the only one who can do x, y, z for the company." Especially about this last

one, dear ones, rest is *not* extravagant. Rest is a human right, and all people should have access to rest.

Now think of these scenarios: talking to someone after they die. Putting flowers at a graveside. Making too much food on a holiday. Celebrating a kindergarten graduation, when you know that years of schooling are still ahead. Buying a wedding gown that you will wear only for a few hours on one day. Paying vet bills for an elderly pet. Even praying for someone. Some people would call these activities impractical, unnecessary, even extravagant. But these activities I've named are also acts of love. And love sometimes shows itself through tenderness and beauty.

Debie Thomas writes that this story of anointing is special because “Mary responds to the call of love *in the moment*. In the *now*. Knowing what Jesus is about to face; knowing that he’s in urgent need of companionship, comfort, and solace; knowing that the time is short to express all the gratitude and affection she carries in her heart, Mary acts. Given the choice between an abstracted need (the poor “out there”) and the concrete need that presents itself at her own doorstep, around her own dinner table, Mary chooses the here and now. She loves the body and soul who is placed in her presence. In doing so, she ends up caring for the one who is denied room at the inn – even to be born. For the one who has no place to lay his head during his years of ministry. For the one whose crucified body is laid in a borrowed tomb. In other words, it *is* the poor Mary serves when she serves Jesus. Just as it is always Jesus we serve when we love without reservation what God places in front of us, here and now.”

All people are worthy of tenderness, of beauty, of love. In a world marked by the Empire breathing down your necks and plotting disciples and financial squabbles and food insecurity and pervasive grief, sometimes the only response for the moment is to pause for love. Theologian Stanley Hauerwas says, “the poor that we always have with us is Jesus. It is to the poor that all extravagance is to be given.”

I wonder what you think is extravagant. I've been brought up with a “special occasion” mindset—save the nice coffee beans for the special occasion, the Prosecco, that special outfit that I'll wear *one day*, etc. But special occasions

are happening all around us, just by living in this stunningly complicated and hard and glorious world. The question is do we recognize them when they occur? Do we know when one is passing us by, when we need to take a moment and rest in that special moment, that important moment?

And when we live each day mindful of the extravagant generosity of God to this world, and we respond, as Mary did, with further generosity, then we can bring about a world where there is *enough* for all.

Friends, over the past few weeks of Lent, we have been leaning into our theme of “Simple Joys of Grace.” This theme encourages us to notice beauty around us, notice joy, notice grace in the course of your every day. And as we near the end of Lent, I wonder what we could learn, as individuals and as a church, about treating each other with tenderness as we continue to be attentive to the grace of the Holy all around us.

In Isaiah 40:8 the prophet says, “The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever.”

Mary of Bethany knew this. Approaching her Savior with devotion, she took action in the only way she could in that moment: with a beautiful and simple act of witness. She knew that beauty does not last. Even tenderness does not last. But her act of care, the pouring out of that sweet fragrance over Jesus’ body, that sensual anointing is important because that was what was called for in the moment. Extravagant generosity that *still today* causes us to think, causes us to wonder, causes us to pause. Generosity that begets generosity, as we learn from Mary’s love that treating each other tenderly makes it possible for us all to live as witnesses to that sacred grace known to us in the life and story of Jesus.

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“Because” (inspired by John 12:1-8, Matthew 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9, Luke 7:36-50)

because we have preserved our joy in manna jars for the long winter of despair,

storing them in the dark corners of our souls,

we have forgotten its gritty taste;

because we have put a tight lid on our joy,

and put it in the back of the pantry,

we have forgotten how it can tickle our noses;

because we are so busy prattling pious platitudes

about the poor, the least, the lost,

we ignore your words which anoint them as your children;

because we have put up the shutters and storm doors

to keep your future from sneaking in,

we have missed the sweet breeze carrying your hope to us;

because we are who we are,

restore us, Holy Grace, and make us

a fragrant offering to the world.