

Pure and Costly
First UMC of Pocatello
The Third Sunday in Lent
March 20, 2022

John 12:1-8 (Mary)

Here we are, back in our Lenten passage, reclining at Martha's table and relishing Lazarus's company. Sensing the nearness of his betrayal, arrest, and death, Jesus has sought out the company of his friends in the town of Bethany. This night, this visit offers him *respite* in the truest sense of the word, a brief interlude before the onset of suffering. Thank God for friends. When he knocked, the door was opened, the meal prepared, the company gathered - his every bodily and material need lovingly met.

Yet there is a person in the room whose joyful devotion and spontaneous freedom inspire her to bring a last unexpected offering to Jesus. Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha, slips out of the dining quarters and returns a moment later holding an ornate jar in her hands. She stands in the doorway with a bright, wild, certain look in her eyes. One by one, the various conversations in the room die down, and every face turns toward her. Time slows - and it is not the wine mingled with the candlelight that slows it, but the sudden shared awareness that something great is about to be done.

Mary approaches Jesus, kneels at his feet like a servant would, undoes the lid to her jar, and in one great sweeping motion pours its contents onto his feet. Immediately, a woody, spicy fragrance erupts into the air, invades every nose and overpowers all other sensations. Oil of nard - pure, costly. One man in the corner is wiping the sudden sting from his eyes and rapidly running the calculation in his head: *Must be a pound of the stuff, worth ten months' wages.*

And the deed is not done! Mary, who poured out many tears at the graveside of her brother, who pours out the costly contents of her jar, she now unbinds her hair, and it too pours down to complete the

anointing of her Lord. With one hand she clasps his first sweet-smelling foot; with the other she run her hair across it, cleaning and drying.

Right now, there is nothing more important for us than to witness this sacrifice, to truly see and understand that Mary offers every surplus she possesses to Jesus. There is nowhere to be but here, in this house, as it is filled with the fragrance of the perfume. Linger long enough and we might say with the poet Denise Levertov, “...there was *Before I saw it*, the vague / past, and *Now*. Forever. Nearby...”¹

Scientific research has shown that smell, more than any other sense, has the power to evoke our memories. In the human brain, the olfactory bulb which processes smell is directly connected to the amygdala, which processes emotions, and the hippocampus, which is involved in the formation of memories. Because of our animal nature, we have far more receptors for smell than we do for taste or for sight.

For me, a whiff of chlorine, ocean air, or an approaching thunderstorm can conjure hundreds of childhood memories.

The biblical writers, of course, would not have known these facts, but they were certainly in tune with the suggestive power of smell. So much so that in the Genesis creation story, God gives life to humankind by breathing through the first man’s nostrils. Genesis 2:7 says, “Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.”

A pound of perfume is a lot of perfume. Many years later, getting even the slightest whiff of it would transport the disciples back to that holy night in Bethany. Not for nothing did Jesus say in a parallel passage from Mark’s Gospel, “Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her” (14:9).

Oh, and if you’re Mary, if you’re Martha, though you may never forget the stench of your brother’s body four days dead, here, tonight, the powerful fragrance from Mary’s anointing is making its own aromatic foothold in your household memory.

¹ From “First Love” by Denise Levertov, *This Great Unknowing: Last Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1999), 8.

And if you're Jesus, taking up the rough wood of the cross, feeling the nail be driven into your feet, might not some faint lingering scent rise and bring before your mind the night those very feet were anointed with oil by a friend who lavished her most precious possession upon you, and might that not bring you consolation in your darkest hour?

And when Jesus' broken body is taken down from the cross and readied for its interment by Nicodemus Joseph of Arimathea and, when they bathe it in oil and spices (John 19:38-42), who can say what miracle of recognition flashed across the veil of time to stimulate the memory of eternity - and call Jesus home?

Today, we've come to the heart of the matter. With Mary's act before us, we realize that the atmosphere of the house *can* change, *does* change, when pure and costly gifts are given - given with no hedging or holding back or hidden agenda. The twentieth-century theologian, Karl Barth, once wrote, "It is clear that this deed of Mary's describes the life of the apostles... And this is what is to take place in the world through their life—the whole house is to be filled with the odour of the ointment."²

This is what is to take place in the world through their life... The Church's life. Our life.

It reminds me of what a Jewish interpreter once wrote about Abraham: "What did Abram resemble? A flask of [sweet perfume], surrounded by wadding and placed in a corner, so that its fragrance could not escape. But when it was [finally] carried from place to place, its fragrance wafted out."³

And of course, there's Paul's famous verse from 2 Corinthians: "[T]hanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him. For we are the aroma of Christ..." (2:14-15).

When we love God our experience of life is transformed - not just ours, but also those around us, those close enough to smell the aroma.

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II.2, 462.

³ Avivah Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis*.

Gifts like Mary's - free, needless, extravagant, wasteful offerings - they bless the world and infuse the air around us with what is pleasing and beautiful. They set in motion a whole new chain reaction of acts, for in the company of a person who loves like this, others are reminded of their own dreams and hopes and possibilities. To give like Mary is what the Church is made for.

I have said before that this is an Easter house in a time before Easter. Mary *gets it*, and is living in God's new creation. We are only able to give like this because Jesus has already given his life - his pure, costly life - fully and irrecoverably to all of humankind. He has stooped to wash the feet of the world. He has answered Mary's tears and raised up Lazarus. He has served us. "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

Mary shows us our vocation. She is a true disciple. She anoints Jesus in his lowliness, just as we are all called by Jesus to love him by loving the hungry, the thirsty, the poor, the naked, the imprisoned.

For were we not once the hungry, the thirsty - left unsatisfied by lesser things?

Were we not once the poor and the poor in spirit - bereft and desperate?

Were we not once the naked, with nothing to shield us from the arrows of life or warm us against the world's frigid indifference?

Were we not once the imprisoned, lost in our egos, bound by our habits, trapped in our fears?

And even for those of us who already trust and follow him, in all our fatigue - our *moral* fatigue from trying to do what's right in a world that rewards what's wrong, our *emotional* fatigue from bearing our burdens day after day, our *physical* fatigue from showing up to do what must be done - in all our *weariness*, Jesus again, and always, stoops down to wash our aching feet, and fill the house with the aroma of his love.

God has held nothing back from us. Jesus “emptied himself” (Phil. 2:7), and the Spirit has been poured out from heaven and is our anointing.

Every gift like Mary’s - pure and costly, extravagant and wasteful, given not to accomplish but to bless - becomes a foothold for others in the land of the living. What I mean is this: Being loved when it is love beyond reason, *it saves us*. Don’t we all want to know where, when, even *if* we will ever see God’s kingdom appearing in the world? Everywhere that a gift like Mary’s is being given, *there* is kingdom. As Jesus promised, the pure in heart will see God (Matt. 5:8).

Perhaps Mary reminded Jesus, on that crucial night, that human life and happiness is worth this kind of lavish pouring out. And perhaps Mary taught everyone else at the dinner, and continues teaching all who seek to serve others, that after every Martha-like duty has been done, and every necessary thing provided, there is still something *more*, something abundant and extravagant, wild and beautiful, that each of us can go get, and, if we choose, pour out till it is empty, and the house is full.

Let us pray.

God of reckless love, you left everything so that you might come to us; you sold everything so that you might purchase us; you dropped everything so that you might embrace us; you poured out everything so that you might fill us. Your very life, all that is good and true and beautiful, is the gift you have freely offered to us. Your faithfulness is the ointment that you massage into our tired feet. Your lowliness raises us up.

During this Lent, give us the heart of Mary, who with her tears awakened your compassion; with her perfume anointed you; with her hair washed you. May we know the joy of receiving a “good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over” (Lk. 6:38), so that we might know the greater joy of giving it up. Help us to truly be your Church, stooped low at the feet of those who share in your sufferings.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.