



Sunday Messages at Scarborough United Church

Lent 5

(Based on John 12:1-8)

April 7, 2019

Rev. Erin Klassen

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised. There, they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.

Everyone was there. And they were celebrating Jesus, and the gift of life that he had given them. And then this happened...

This scandalous thing.

Jewish women were not to "let their hair down" in public. Especially not with this incredibly intimate act of touching and washing Jesus' feet - he is not her spouse. It would seem as outlandish and inappropriate then as now.

When I read/hear this passage I like to imagine the scene.

A boisterous, celebratory gathering. Folks are talking and eating and laughing.

Then, there is a scent in the air. The chatter shifts to wondering about the smell.

As the smell grows, the noise dies down.

Soon, the air is perfumed and heavy, cloying, so strong you can taste it.

And the silence is just as heavy as people watch in discomfort and amazement....

Watching as this fragrant oil is poured onto Jesus' feet. Nard - having been harvested in the Himalayas and imported from India - would have been incredibly expensive. And this is pure nard, not watered down in any way: neither for cost nor smell. It's estimated to be about a year's worth of wages for the average labourer.

And here is Mary pouring this pricey and aromatic oil onto Jesus feet. Likely making a mess as it drips all over the place, the excess falling down, seeping into the dirt floor, wasted.

The smell, the silence, the shock.

That's when Judas speaks up.

Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?

I think he probably said what was on everyone's minds. While the gospel makes sure to clarify that he had ulterior motives, I don't think that he was out of line with his question. His concern and outrage are understandable. How can Mary be so wasteful when there is so much need around them?

Judas represents the way of sensible prudence. I get him here. It's hard to see what Mary is doing as a good thing, when there is so much more that she could be doing. What about the poor?

Which brings us to an interesting line: *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."*

This is one of those lines that has stuck with us in all the wrong ways. Because it can and has been interpreted in ways that have justified poverty. This is good news, if we see inequality in it, then we are doing it wrong. Jesus doesn't say that we should ignore those who have need, for attention, love, resources, justice. What he says is that having poor among you, in such abundance is shameful. Judas will always have the poor among him because he does not share what he has, but seeks only for himself.

For example, he thinks that this gift that Mary has, it should go to someone who truly needs it...

But who is Judas to say that Jesus is not the one in need here?

Because if he is fully human and fully divine, then he also needs and deserves love. What he has been doing all along, and what he will continue to do in the coming days is sharing of himself and his humanity, in all of his frailty and vulnerability, taking risks and needing connection.

Mary gets this. That he is not only special, but also so, so normal. And she reaches out to him, connects with him. This act of radical service, of love and devotion, will cast a shadow over the coming week, from the joyous parade into Jerusalem to Jesus' arrest, his trial, and death.

And Mary is fully aware of the cost of death. She gets it. She's just been there with her family. Consider the smell of the nard contrasted with the smell of Lazarus having been dead for four days...

Her grief for Lazarus has turned into joy for the gift of renewed life and relationship. And it will repeat with Jesus. Her anointing serves a dual purpose. Oil was used to anoint kings, and so this is an implicit recognition and dramatic announcement of Jesus as king. It was also customary to anoint a body for burial, and so this is also a preparation of Jesus for what is to come, another unspoken recognition and announcement of who he is and what he is here to do. That he will redefine kingship through death.

As Karoline Lewis puts it, Mary is loving Jesus into his future. It is her extravagant love for him, that makes it possible for him to show extravagant love in what follows -- washing the feet of his disciples, handing himself over to be arrested in the garden, carrying his own cross, dying, rising, and ascending.

Mary gets what it means to follow Christ. And she will follow him to the foot of the cross. She will be in the garden early on Easter morning, becoming one of the first apostles.

She shows us how to be Christian. Her service to another (just like Martha's) is rooted in devotion to Jesus.

Which leads us to these questions that I invite you to reflect on now:
Are our actions of outreach and service rooted in faith?
Is our faith exemplified in extravagance - sacrifice and service?

We will remember the soothing,
And not forget the jarring.
We will remember the sweetness,
And not forget the sour.
We will remember the jagged desperateness of Judas,
And own it; it is our story too.
We will remember
The passion of love,
The smell of perfume,
The pain of rejection,
The stench of blood money.
And help us on the journey, to hold the tensions,
to face both the delight and the difficulty,
We will say "yes" to God's generosity in creation,
we will say "yes" to God's judgment (love?) poured out on humankind,
we will say "yes" to justice in Jesus.

*-Wild Goose Community,
Iona Scotland*