

“At The Feet of Jesus”

The Gospel Lesson for today is read from John 12:1-8

Hear the words from the disciple Luke:

Read John 12:1-8

“The Word of God for the people of God.”

“Thanks be to God”

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, during these days of Lent, we walk behind you, far behind you, as you walk toward the cross. Teach us the discipline, the faith, the commitment to walk faithfully down this narrow way. Help us to see our times of suffering and difficulty as opportunities for us to share in your redemptive suffering for the sake of the world. Give us not a way around the pain, but a way through it, for your sake and the gospel, we pray. Amen.

Intro:

Today we are headed to a home in the Jerusalem suburb of Bethany, where Jesus stopped in to see his old friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus before he entered the city for the last time. He loved them, that much John tells us, although he does not tell us why. Maybe there is no "why" to love. They called him Lord, so they knew who he was, and yet they were not his disciples, at least not in any formal sense. They were his friends, the three people in whose presence he could be a man as well as a Messiah.

Just days before, Jesus had worked a miracle at their house. He had been across the river when the sisters' urgent message reached him. Lord," it read, "he whom you love is ill." So he had come to them, knowing full well it was too late. Lazarus was so dead that he stank, so dead that Jesus stood in front of his tomb and wept. Then he roared so loud at death that he scared

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death away. While the sisters tried to decide whether to run away too, their brother Lazarus came stumbling from his tomb, trailing his shroud behind him like a used cocoon.

Now Jesus has come back to Bethany with the temple posse (aka the chief priests and the Pharisees) hot on his trail. By raising Lazarus from the dead he has graduated from the category of "manageable nuisance" to "serious threat." News of the incident has sent his followers over the top. There is not a chance Pilate is going to ignore them during the Passover festival. It is time for Jesus to disappear before he leads hundreds to their deaths. So his days are numbered and he knows it. When he arrives at his friends' house in Bethany, they can see it on his face. So they take him in and care for him, shutting the world out for this one night at least. Lazarus is still clumsy from his four days in the tomb. He sits and stares while Martha makes a stew. Mary, meanwhile, has slipped away, gone to find something in her room. Martha is used to this. Mary is always disappearing, even when she is sitting right there with everyone else. She gets this look on her face, like she's listening to music no one else can hear. Martha knows there is nothing to be done but to work around her, being careful to reel Mary in when she drifts too far. Finally, supper is on the table and they all sit down to eat, saying what they hope and hiding what they fear. Lazarus sits near his friend Jesus, unaware of the trade that has occurred. Jesus was safe across the river, beyond the reach of his enemies. By returning to Bethany, he has traded his life for the life of his friend. Funny, huh? The recently deceased Lazarus of Bethany will outlive the savior Jesus of Nazareth.

No one notices that Mary has gone again until she comes back holding a clay jar in her hands. Wordless, she kneels at Jesus' feet and breaks the jar's neck. The smell of spikenard fills the room—an extremely priceless perfumed ointment with a sharp scent halfway between mint

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and ginseng. Then, as everyone in the room watches her, she does four remarkable things in a row.

First *she loosens* her hair in a room full of men, [scandalous, so shocking] which an honorable woman never does. Then *she pours* perfume on Jesus' feet, which is also not done. The head, maybe--people did that sort of thing to kings ceremonially when they were being crowned, called anointing--but not the feet; anointing someone's feet was unheard of. Then *she touches* him--a single woman rubbing a single man's feet--also not done, not even among friends. Then *she wipes* the perfume off with her hair--totally inexplicable--the bizarre end to an all around bizarre act. I saw this bumper sticker yesterday in the Columbiana Mall parking lot as Kendall and I were walking to our car, it read, “well behaved women rarely make history”.

Most of us are so moved by the scene that we overlook its strangeness, or else we don't care. The point is that she loved him, right? Right. But we also confuse this account with three others in the Bible--one each from Matthew, Mark and Luke. In the first two, an unnamed woman anoints Jesus' head at the house of Simon the Leper during the last week of his life. In the third story, the scene happens at Simon the Pharisee's house, much earlier in Jesus' ministry. There Jesus is eating supper when a notorious sinner slips into the room and stands weeping over his feet, then drops to the ground to cover them with kisses before rubbing them with oil of myrrh.

Only in John's version of the story does the woman have a name-Mary--and a relationship with Jesus--**not a stranger, not a notorious sinner**, but his long-time friend--which makes her act all the more peculiar. He knows she loves him. He loves her too. So why this public demonstration, this odd dramatic performance in front of all their friends? It's extravagant. It's excessive. She's gone overboard, as Judas is quick to note.

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"Why wasn't this perfume sold for a whole lot of money and given to the poor?" That's what Judas wants to know, but Jesus brushes him aside.

"Leave her alone," he says. "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"--which is about as odd a thing for him to say as what Mary did. Here is the champion of the poor, always putting their needs ahead of his, suddenly reversing course. Leave her alone. Leave me alone. Just this once, let her look after me, because my time is running out and I will not be able to spend time with you all in the flesh much longer.

Whatever Mary thought about what she did, and whatever anyone else in the room thought about it, Jesus took it as a message from God--not the hysteric nurturing of an old maid gone sweetly mad but the carefully performed act of a prophet. Everything around Mary smacked of significance--Judas, the betrayer, challenging her act; the flask of nard--wasn't it left over from Lazarus' funeral?--and out in the yard, a freshly vacated tomb that still smelled of burial spices, waiting for a new occupant. The same air that was dense with Lazarus' death is now mixed with the pleasant aroma of the costly perfume, and while there may at first have been some doubt about whose death it was, Mary's prophetic act revealed the truth.

She was anointing Jesus for his burial, and while her behavior may have seemed strange to those standing around, it was no more strange than that of the prophets who went before her--Ezekiel eating the scroll of the Lord as a sign that he carried the word of God around inside of him (Ezekiel 2), or Jeremiah smashing the clay jar to show God's judgment on Judah and Jerusalem (Jeremiah 19), or Isaiah walking around naked and barefoot as an oracle against the nations (Isaiah 20). Prophets do things like that. They act out. They act out the truth that no one

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else can see, and those standing around either write them off as nuts or fall silent before the disturbing news they bring from God.

When Mary stood before Jesus with that pound of pure nard in her hand, it could have gone either way. She could have anointed his head and everyone there could have proclaimed him a king. But she did not do that. When she moved toward him, she dropped to her knees instead and poured the perfume on his feet, which could only mean one thing. The only man who got his feet anointed was a dead man, and Jesus knew it. "Leave her alone," he said to those who would have prevented her. Let her finish delivering this message.

So Mary rubbed his feet with perfume so precious that its sale might have fed a poor family for a year, an act so lavish that it suggests another layer to her prophecy. There will be nothing economical about this man's death, just as there has been nothing economical about his life. In him, the extravagance of God's love is made flesh. In him, the excessiveness of God's mercy is made manifest.

This bottle will not be held back to be kept and admired. This precious substance will not be saved. It will be opened, offered and used, at a great price. It will be raised up and poured out for the life of the world, emptied to the last drop. Before that happens, Jesus will gather his friends together one last time. At another banquet, around another supper table, with most of the same people present, Jesus will strip, tie a towel around his waist, and wash his disciples' feet. Then he will give them a new commandment: Love one another, as I have loved you. At least one of the disciples will argue with him, while others will wonder if he has lost his mind. But a few will watch him working on their feet and remember Mary bending over his feet like that--the prophet Mary--who knew how to respond to Jesus without being told, the one who acted out his

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last, new commandment before he ever said it. Remembering Mary may help them leave him alone while he finishes delivering his message.

At home in Bethany, the storm clouds are still piling up against the door when Mary gives the forecast: it will be bad, very bad. Jesus knows that he will not be seeing his friends again. He will carry with him the aroma of their love and devotion. As he stumbles with the cross on his back, the stink of the crowd, of blood and sweat and ugliness all around him, he will remember this moment of overwhelming gratitude. His earthly life has not been easy and comfortable. This dinner with friends, their laughter, Martha's good food, and Mary's gift of love are the last reminders of what is good in this earthly life. We are glad that he is being given this last gift from God among dear friends.

The suffering that is about to begin is the abnormality. What is normal is life with all its good gifts: Love of family and friends, food for the body, and beauty with all its appeal to the senses. This story is a permission for us also to cherish these good gifts. And now, he will set his face toward Jerusalem, suffering, and death because there is no reason to fear running out--of hand or of life --for where God is concerned, there is always more than we can ask or imagine-- gifts from our lavish, generous Lord. So today on this fifth Sunday in Lent, we too set our eyes toward the resurrection and the costly gift of Jesus so that we may have eternal life with our Lord who poured himself empty for us.¹

Let us pray:

O God, heavenly Father, your Son Jesus Christ enjoyed rest and refreshment in the home of Mary and Martha of Bethany: Give us the will to love you, open our hearts to hear you, and strengthen our hands to serve you in others for his sake, through Jesus Christ our

¹ http://day1.org/1760-the_prophet_mary

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risen Lord; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

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Prayers of the People

In peace, let us pray.

Have mercy, O God. For the peace of the world, that a spirit of respect and compassion may grow among all peoples, in the world and in your church, we pray to you, most Gracious God. Have mercy, O God. For those in positions of public trust, that they may serve in ways that enhance the common good, promoting justice, dignity and freedom for all, we pray to you O God. Have mercy, O God. For a blessing upon the labors of all, and for wisdom in caring for your creation, we pray to you, most loving God. Have mercy, O God. For all who suffer and are in pain, for all who grieve, for those who are imprisoned, oppressed, or enslaved, that they may be released and freed from distress, we pray to you O Christ. Christ have mercy. For this community, that we may be awake to your word and responsive to your call, that in all we do your glory may shine, we pray to you O Christ. Christ have mercy. For those with whom we disagree, and those we do not understand. Give us the grace and humility to practice kindness and gentleness, we pray to you, O Christ. Christ have mercy. For ourselves, for the forgiveness of our sin and hardness of heart, for the strength and courage to follow Jesus more closely, we pray to you. Holy Spirit, come to us. Free us from anxiety; fill us anew with joy, peace and patience; give us health of mind, body and spirit; empower us to serve you and our neighbors in all we do, we pray to you. Holy Spirit, come to us. Holy One, come to us. Transform us into your image from one degree of glory to the next, and sustain us until that day we are united with you and all the saints, rejoicing with endless joy. May it be so, O Trinity of Love. Alleluia! Amen.²

² <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/liturgical-resources-for-2019-general-conference>