

Rev. Lisa Schrott
4-3-22
John 12:1-8
Healing Through Gratitude

Our scripture this morning is a story that is found in various forms in all four Gospels. While the details across the Gospels differ, the essential truth is the same – Jesus is anointed with costly perfume in recognition that he is the Messiah and in gratitude for the gift of healing, salvation and new life he is bringing. This morning we hear the story from the Gospel of John. Listen now for Word of God to you from John chapter 12:

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." **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

Mary and Martha. Martha and Mary. If you are a woman in the church, you have likely been asked if you are a Mary or a Martha. Martha, the worker bee and Mary, the contemplative. Mary and Martha make a few appearances in the Gospels. They host dinners for Jesus. They are friends of Jesus – and not just casual friends. They, along with their brother Lazarus, have a close and deep friendship with Jesus. The kind of friendship that is sustained across the miles and time apart. The kind of friendship where when you are struggling or there is a problem or when life is falling apart, even if you haven't spoken in a while, you know you can call and they will be there for you. That is what happened just before our scripture passage this morning.

When Lazarus became ill, Mary and Martha sent a message to Jesus, saying "Lord, he whom you love is ill."¹ Now Jesus waited a few days to travel to Bethany, where Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived. By the time he arrived, Lazarus had died. In fact, when Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Crowds had gathered to console Martha and Mary on the death of their brother. And then foreshadowing his own resurrection, Jesus rolled away the stone from the tomb, and cried with a loud voice "Lazarus, come out!" Lazarus emerged from the tomb, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to the crowd, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Many in the crowd who had seen what he did now believed in Jesus. The story could end here. The curtain comes down, we jump to our feet and applaud, not quite sure what we have

¹ John 11:3; The story of the raising of Lazarus can be found in John 11:1-45

seen, but knowing that Jesus is unlike anyone we have ever encountered before. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus live happily ever after, the story of Lazarus resurrection from the dead, becoming lore in Bethany but not so much beyond this village on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Except that the story didn't end that way.

Some of crowds were disturbed by what Jesus had done. Maybe they were fearful of something they couldn't understand; maybe they wanted lives that were well-controlled and predictable and this Jesus character didn't fit their understanding of a decent and orderly kind of religion; maybe they were tired of Mary and Martha and Lazarus getting all the breaks. After all Mary and Martha and Lazarus hosted all of these elegant dinners for their important friends. Not that you wanted to be invited anyway – I mean Martha could be pretty over the top, but no one raised your brother from the dead after his illness. And his wife and children were now living with you... So they went and told the chief priest and religious leaders about what Jesus had done. The chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." So from that day on they planned to put Jesus to death. And the upcoming Passover feast was a good time to do it, because as an observant Jewish man, Jesus would come up to Jerusalem for the feast. And we will hear the rest of that story during Holy Week, beginning with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem next week.

This morning we hear the other thing that happened after Lazarus was resurrected by Jesus - Mary and Martha host a feast at their home to honor him. They come to the table to give Jesus thanks for all he has done. In gratitude for the new life of their brother Lazarus. It was six days before the Passover – before that Last Supper – the meal we will commemorate this morning when we too are invited to the table.

So much of Jesus' ministry took place at the table. The table where Jesus dined not just with his friends, but also strangers and sinners, those on the fringes of society, those who rarely if ever got invitations to dinners like the one hosted by Martha that night. So much of Jesus' ministry took place at the table. The table of welcome. The table of grace. The table of gratitude. That is what it was that night – a table of gratitude. Both Martha and Mary gave extravagant gifts of gratitude. Martha expressed her gratitude to Jesus in the way she knew best – serving an elegant meal worthy of a king. Mary expressed her gratitude in the way she knew best – an act of devotion, anointing Jesus with oil, marking Jesus as a King.

To be marked by God. The word Messiah in Hebrew means the "anointed one." The word "Christ" is a derivative of the Greek word for anoint. Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the anointed one of God.

The practice of anointing had tremendous significance in the ancient near east. In our 21st century world we tend to associate it with services of healing and wholeness or the last rites in the Catholic Church. But for the people of Jesus' time anointing the body with oil was a more common practice. It was a mark of respect sometimes paid by a host to his guests. It was part of the rites of setting people apart for specific types of ministry. Priests, especially the high priests, were anointed as they began their work in the temple. And most notably kings were anointed as they were seen to be divinely selected – appointed by God to be rulers over the people of Israel. We hear of King David being anointed three times.

And yet Mary's gift catches us off guard. The extravagance and abundance is unexpected. We expect that rituals like anointing come from people in authority who have been chosen for certain roles. Mary's act is grounded and relational; it is open. You see Mary doesn't just politely anoint Jesus' feet with an expensive scented oil— a little dab will do you — need to save my perfumed oil for a rainy day. Rather she gave a generous and abundant anointing — pouring all the expensive contents of her jar on Jesus' feet and then wiping his feet with her hair. What an unexpected act — an act so radical that the disciple Judas immediately erupts. I can picture the disciples, lounging around the table and room, finally a moment to relax after all that has been going on and this woman — who does she think she is — she essentially throws a wad of money into the fire. After all the scrimping and saving, all the poor and those in need they have encountered — and this woman Mary— she places a pound of costly perfume on the feet of Jesus.

And who is this Mary who anoints Jesus? A woman who is willing to sacrifice so much to show honor and care for a beloved guest. A woman who is preparing Jesus for the last legs of a journey toward death. A woman showing gratitude with abundant love and grace. A love and grace so radical that Judas, the one who betray Jesus, could not comprehend it. A love and grace we sometimes can't comprehend ourselves when we betray Jesus with our words and actions.

Anointing is an act of pure extravagance - Mary's anointing was so lavish that others actually participated in it - the fragrance spread throughout the house. Mary and Martha and Lazarus and the disciples will remember that fragrance for the rest of their lives — olfactory memories are so deeply encoded in our brains. They will remember that sweet fragrance of new life, a scent that washed away the odor and stench from Lazarus' dead body, decaying in the tomb.

Mary's extravagant anointing of Jesus was a response of gratitude not just for the healing her brother received. It was also for the healing that she and Martha and the crowds had received. For all the people whom Jesus had touched and healed. For all the people for whom Jesus had recognized their dignity and had restored them to right relationship with their family, neighbors, and society. For men and women. For landowner and servant. For the older brother and the prodigal son. For rich and poor. For all.

Mary's extravagant anointing of Jesus was a response of gratitude that stood in stark contrast to that of Judas. Judas asks for an either/or response - either you love Jesus or you love the poor. Jesus refutes Judas by making reference to a passage in Deuteronomy that calls on helping people in need by building a society where there is no one in need.² Jesus refutes Judas by affirming the kind of both/and love Mary has shown; one can love both Jesus and the poor. Biblical scholar Gail O'Day notes that "Mary's anointing of Jesus anticipates the love commandment that Jesus will give his disciples: 'I give you a new commandment, that you should love one another. Just as I have loved you'.³ The depth of Mary's love for Jesus is signaled by the extravagance of her gift. Mary is the first person in the Gospel to live out Jesus' love commandment."⁴

² Deuteronomy 15:4

³ John 13:34-35

⁴ Gail R. O'Day. *The Gospel of John*. In: *Women's Bible Commentary. 20th Anniversary Ed.* Ed by. CA Newsom, SH Ringe, JE Lapsley. Westminster John Knox Press, 2012. p525-525

Too often we live in the either/or world of Judas and not the both/and world of Mary. Too often we are like the religious leaders of Jesus' time worried that we will look bad when others look good, as if there was a finite pot of love in the world. They needed someone to oppose to keep their power. In her daily devotional *Piloting Faith*, the Rev. Cameron Trimble this week called out this type of either/or thinking. She says, "Our great spiritual teachers refused to fall into the binary trap by feeding oppositions. They saw clearly that the binaries ... were competing magnetic forces creating each other's existence...Sociology and cultural studies teach us that groups of people define themselves mainly by who they are *not*, what they are *against*, what beliefs they do *not* hold, what behaviors they do *not* practice. They define themselves in the negative - against another group, issue, ideology, or politic. Their identity requires a problem or an enemy. They need someone to oppose to act with any force in the world."

Watching the news after reading her devotional, I was struck by the accuracy of Trimble's words. We too often define ourselves by what we are not and what we are against. Trimble continues, "Living by what we are *for*, what we *support*, who we *love*, what we *cherish* is harder to sustain. Its boundaries are more porous, and it's welcome more inclusive. This is why we can point to historical moments of great violence, but it's harder to see historical movements of great love. Living in the positive requires higher consciousness. It requires intention. When Jesus found himself facing opposition, he didn't argue about the rightness or wrongness of a position. He focused on human suffering. "Where are we wounding each other?" he asked.⁵

Where are we wounding each other? Jesus asked. Where in our cities, in our neighborhood, in our families do we need acts of healing, acts of radical love and grace? Acts of sacrifice of tremendous value, acts of generosity and humility? We are called to be vehicles of the radical acts of love and grace that Jesus blessed us with. We are called to recognize the acts of abundant love and grace that we each have received in our own lives amidst the unfolding tragedies in our world today and we are called to respond in gratitude.

In a few minutes we will gather at the Table. Jesus is our host and we will give our thanks for the abundant love expressed in the bread of life and poured out in the cup of salvation. Extravagant love – a love that is filled to the brim and overflowing and whose fragrance fills the room and brings us the promise of healing, a promise of restoration and reconciliation. A promise of new life. Let us respond in gratitude. Join me in prayer.

⁵ Cameron Trimble. Where Are We Wounding Each Other? *Piloting Faith*.
<https://camerontrimble.com/2022/03/11/where-are-we-wounding-each-other/>