

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday April 7, 2019 Lent 5C
Text: John 12: 1-8
Preacher: Christopher McLaren
Theme: Give it all, give it now!

"Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead." (John 12:1).

Jesus loves Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary. He's at home when he is with them. This story is about Jesus' love and where his deep love for humankind will lead. Jesus sits at table with the one who has been brought back to life again. This is no ordinary dinner party as the beginning of the story makes clear. This is a story about death and life.

Jesus' life and ministry are about communicating God's life and love into the precarious human condition. Even though the connection between the divine and the human is spiritual and invisible to the eye, it is at the center of who Jesus is. This connection between God and human existence is revealed or demonstrated through particular events in the ministry of Jesus. John calls these events signs, moments of the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God in the person of Jesus. The raising of Lazarus is one of these signs. It is a sign that points to the deep love of God at work in the person of Jesus. Divine Love animates Jesus' life and ministry. **Bringing new life is a sign of the Divine Love. Wherever new life emerges, Divine Love is at work. This is a clue to what the spiritual life is really about, looking, keeping our eyes and hearts open to new life happening around us.**

One wonders, what is it like to sit at table with one who has been brought out of the tomb. This is precious time. This is life as bonus material for Jesus' friend who had been dead, is now sharing bread and wine with him at table. I doubt the conversation is about how the Jerusalem soccer team is doing in the desert premier league.

While Lazarus has been given more time, Jesus' time is growing short. Jesus' raising of Lazarus was a deed of power, and it rattled the religious elites who want to kill both Jesus and Lazarus, fearing his growing influence and gathering of disciples.

What do we do when time grows short? What do we do when we realize that we may not have the one that we love near us for much longer? Have you ever faced this question?

Mary offers us her answer. She sits at Jesus' feet, the posture of learning from a rabbi. Mary takes a flask of costly perfume and pours it all over Jesus' feet, the sweet strong fragrance filling the room. Then she begins to wipe Jesus' feet with her hair. With all of its erotic overtones she begins to caress Jesus' feet, wiping them with her hair, so that the fragrance of this moment will stay with her for days, reminding her of his presence with them, of the life that he continues to point her toward. It is a powerful and sensual scene. Mary was not embarrassed. She loved Jesus and intended to demonstrate that love in this extravagant act.

Mary's response embodies the well-known advice given by writer Annie Dillard, to aspiring writers. ***"Spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later place... give it, give it all, give it now."*** I suppose that this is advice for life as much as for writing.

Mary anoints Jesus as if for burial. She who daily is reminded of the reality of death looking into the eyes of Lazarus, embraces the life and death of Jesus in her midst. She does not know how much longer he will be with her. Mary loves Jesus. She lets her hair down and lives in the moment with Jesus, offering us this act of reckless beauty.

"See how he loved him!" the scriptures tell us. Jesus wept at the tomb before he brought Lazarus out of death and back into life. Jesus does not stop people from dying. But through his love he shares in their suffering and the sufferings of the ones who loved them. But Mary knows something more, she knows somehow intuitively that Jesus' love has more depths to show. **Mary is a messenger in the gospels, she is preparing us to gradually understand the love of God.** If this life of Christ is to communicate that God's love is stronger than death, Jesus' own death is not far away. **The real Glory of the Son of God is that he willingly enters into the full human condition in order to save the full human condition. If Jesus is to heal humanity, he must embrace the dark waters of the human experience including death.**

The death and burial of Jesus is something overwhelming, it will thrill and fill and perfume the entire house of those who serve and eat with Jesus. When Mary wipes the feet of Jesus with her own hair it is not to clean them of excess nard, rather it is to share in the abundance of the nard and the fragrance. It is to scent her hair and her very person with the love that flows from him. Only the contemplative Mary, the one open to the mystery of God, who sits at the feet of Jesus can show us this deeper dimension. She demonstrates for us something we cannot see but can feel, that the life of Jesus is what sustains life. "What has come into being in him was life and the life was the light of all people" (John 1:4). As one theologian put it, "When the eternal Word dies and is buried, he sustains all who believe and live in him through physical death and burial into endless spiritual life." Connecting our lives to Jesus, taking the fragrance of his life and death and burial into our lives, wiping his feet with our hair, touching Jesus and allowing Jesus' life to touch ours is the way that Mary shows us.

Remember the love poetry of the bible from the Song of songs:

"While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance. My beloved is to me a bag of myrrh that lies between my breasts." (Song of songs 1: 12-13).

Can we handle such sensual imagery in our sacred story? Can we allow Jesus to be the lover of our souls?

Judas breaks the spell. Judas (how did he get in here?), Mr. Bleeding Heart Liberal, President of Habitat for Humanity says to Mary, “Why was this perfume not sold and the money given to the poor?” (12:6). And we listen up because it might be what we would have said.

“Why is their good coffee at coffee hour when there are refugees looking for a place to live?”

But Jesus surprises, “Leave her alone. She has this oil for the day of my burial. The poor are always with you. But you do not always have me.” (12:7-8).

Judas does not know what Mary knows nor has he received Jesus. Judas does not sense the love of God so near to him in the person of Jesus. Judas needs some love poetry in his life.

*Seat me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm;
For love is strong as death,
passion fierce as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire,
a raging flame.
Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can love drown it.
If one offered for love
all the wealth of his house,
it would be utterly scorned.
(Song of Songs 8:6-7).*

Love is as strong as death and its passion fierce as the grave. Love cannot be bought and sold nor can it be quenched. Judas is stuck, blinded to the deeper love of God. He reduces the perfume to money, avoiding the spiritual in favor of the practical.

On the outside, Judas presents himself as an upstanding citizen, one who wants to alleviate the suffering of the poor. But on the inside Judas is bankrupt as he looks for a way to enrich himself.

Jesus confronts Judas about his own inner hypocrisy. In love, he tries to help Judas see that his concern for the poor is dodging the real issue of relationship with him. He wants Judas to drop the mask of social concern and consider his relationship to the living God and to what is happening in the present moment. But Judas cannot do it.

Mary’s shocking gesture is meant to awaken us to a deeper relationship with the Lord of life, the one whom death cannot hold, the one who knows that love is stronger than death. We live in a world surrounded by a culture of death: we entertain ourselves to death while many go hungry or lack opportunities for thriving, we accept the violence of our culture as a given, drug addiction stalks our streets and claims our young with so few resources for treatment and help, we are slowly poisoning our environment

with plastics and chemicals and greenhouse gases, in our sexualized culture with lack real intimacy and wonder why families are in crisis, we celebrate external beauty over internal character and wonder why our culture is in such pain. The culture of death makes our need of Jesus all the more real. How will each of us reach out for a connection to the source of life? Will we stop hiding from a deeper intimacy with God behind whatever is at hand, even good things? How do we connect our life to God's life?

I take great encouragement from Gordon Cosby, the founding pastor of the Church of our Savior in Washington, D.C., who died in 2012. Gordon was a profoundly Christian man who strove to know Jesus. He said this one time in an interview:

"If one longs for depth in one's life, we must focus on a very few things. There is so little time in one's brief lifetime. And what is that one thing? We are saying that it is Jesus. I choose to go deep-sea diving in that ocean. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Is that true or false? By faith I say that it is true, and I give my entire life to that deep exploration. I want to know Christ in depth and to be transformed into his likeness. It is that likeness, the likeness of Christ that I want to have when I embark on a journey to the Land beyond death. There are infinite depths in Christ to explore. Our task is to be so deeply and intimately connected to Christ as a community that the world will experience the resurrected Christ – the newness God intends – whenever it touches our corporate life." (Gordon Cosby – Church of our Savior).

Mary shows us the way, she kneels at the feet of Jesus, she gives all that she has to the one in whom life dwells, to the one who connects her to the divine love. Wiping Jesus' feet with her hair, Mary ensures that the fragrance will linger on her own body in the days to come. The memory of this moment will cling to her when her friend is taken in the middle of the night, when he is convicted on trumped up charges, when he pours out his life on the cross for the life of the world. She connects her life to Jesus, which is no small thing. She encourages us to do the same. **Her act of reckless beauty bids us to follow this powerful advice in giving ourselves to Jesus.**

"Spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later place... give it, give it all, give it now." -Annie Dillard

Note: I am indebted to the commentary of John Shea concerning this passage and its deeper contemplative meaning through the eyes of Mary of Bethany. And to Gordon Cosby, deceased pastor of the Church of the Savior, in Washington, D.C.