

Sermon Preached on April 3, 2022 – Fifth Sunday in Lent

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St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, Yarmouth, ME 04096

Isaiah 43:16-21

Psalm 126

Philippians 3:4b-14

John 12:1-8

Extravagant Embodied Love

So often when preparing to write a sermon, I try to pay attention to how Jesus is acting in the text – I try to identify and name the liberative action or belief that is expressed in Jesus and often from there I find my themes for my sermons.

For it is our faith in Jesus – that radical prophet of love and mercy – that liberates us from the brokenness of sin in our lives and gives us a glimpse into the beloved kin-dom.

But as we pay attention to Jesus this morning, Jesus is pointing us towards someone else – no, not Judas, that thief...Mary.

Mary is where the heart of this morning's story resides – so allow me to tell the story once more, with some different perspectives, to journey into that room to experience this moment once again.

Jesus and his disciples have just journeyed a great distance – their destination is Jerusalem. The capital city of both politics and their faith. It's a destination Jesus has known his ministry would take him – and, to be honest, he's known that it likely will end there.

He travels with purpose. He travels with deep belief. He travels with the assurance that God accompanies him – and, along with his disciples, they've been able to make a great difference along the way: healing people, sharing the Word of God in parables and sermons.

It wasn't long ago that they found themselves in Bethany approaching the home where his friend Lazarus lived only to find out that Lazarus had died – his sisters, beloved sisters, Mary and Martha – greeted Jesus on the path and in their anger, in their grief, they yelled at him "Jesus if you had been here he wouldn't had died"

Oh the pain and sadness of grief that filled his body in that moment – the kind that made his insides feel like they were twisting up into his heart. He couldn't prevent the tears from streaming down his face.

It was like a power ignited in him – he barely remembered asking to be shown the grave before he found himself asking for the stone to be rolled away and, not before offering a prayer to God the Creator of the Universe, his Holy begotten Father, to hear his cry, yelling to his friend "Lazarus, come out!"

The words came out with such great power and belief, and yet he was still somewhat in awe that there, at the entrance to the tomb, still wrapped in his burial shroud, he saw his friend Lazarus step out into the sunlight.

He didn't imagine he'd be back at this home so soon, but yet, here he is – as he enters the home his friend Lazarus is there to greet him. Jesus isn't 100% certain, but he wonders if he noticed that his friend still has a bit of stench to him, the smell of death – a smell he wonders might be his own fate in the days that lay ahead.

The disciples all find a place to rest – their hearts are weary as are their feet from the journey. Jesus keeps saying that he must go to Jerusalem where he will die and then rise again, yet they cannot fathom it.

From the kitchen, where Martha fusses over a meal she has been preparing ever since first getting word that the Jesus and his disciples were on their way, Mary glimpses the beloved of her soul enter the house – the one who received her tears, held her angry words, and raised her brother from death.

Mary has also heard what Jesus has been saying, that he was going to Jerusalem to die. And, she knew exactly what to do.

She went to the cupboard where they kept their treasured belongings – hidden of course, behind mundane things like their sack of wheat and a few goblets. There, in the same cupboard was a platter that their father had made from his own hands and from which they had feasted at every holiday and, yes, every birthday.

And there too, in this cupboard, was a jar of oil – not just any oil, a jar of pure nard, one whole pound. It had been purchased at great cost to anoint the dead in their family. Not long ago, she and Martha had used some of this oil on their brother's body when he laid in their home breathless. The scent from the jar is strong – you can smell it as soon as you open that cupboard, it's strong but lovely – it is the scent of honoring a loved one, it is the scent that had accompanied so many of her family to the grave, it was the scent of love.

Mary pulled out the jar and wasted no time in heading directly to where Jesus was sitting knowing that if she waited too long the opportunity would pass.

Jesus knew her and so was not concerned when she walked right up to him although his disciples seemed to take a collective breath.

Mary knelt in front of Jesus who made eye contact with her in a way that simultaneously communicated curiosity and affection. Mary unhinged the strap on Jesus sandals and took them off one at a time, careful to place them just a bit more than an arm's length away.

She paused for just a moment, holding Christ's feet in her hands – she closed her eyes and imagined where these feet had trod, she thought of all the healings, the conversations over meals, the soft sands and the wet beaches, the boats and the synagogues – she opened her eyes worried that she had gotten lost in her head and time had passed, but truly it had only been a moment.

And then, in one swift motion, she removed the lid to the jar and proceeded to pour the nard on Jesus' feet. She knew only a little would suffice, but there was something that compelled her to keep pouring. The scent escaped into the room like a box of fireworks accidentally set off by a spark assaulting the nostrils of everyone gathered.

The oil moved slowly, intentionally causing the Savior's feet to glimmer as the sunlight reflected off the moisture. She kept pouring. Before she knew it, the jar was empty and, having forgotten to grab a towel in her stupor out of the kitchen just a moment earlier, she grabbed the first thing she thought of to wipe the Lord's feet: her hair.

This time, you could for sure hear the intake of air from the disciples, almost a guffaw from Peter, and a "tisk" from Judas.

But Jesus just kept looking at her – so lost in the moment, Mary didn't hear one of the disciples question Jesus about what she was doing and she didn't hear how Jesus responded – when she looked up, all she saw was the look on Jesus' face and the wetness of his eyes.

With each stroke of her hair, Mary blessed Jesus as he had blessed her – at this point she had stopped shaking and instead moved with intention and power. “Blessed are you, Jesus the Christ” “Blessed are you, Jesus the Anointed One” “Blessed are you, Jesus our Savior”.

When most of the oil had been sopped up in her hair, she stopped wiping Jesus' feet and gave him one last glance. She knew, he knew: Jesus was ready for all that would come his way – Jesus was ready for death. Mary had anointed him for the grave.

The first thing that strikes me is the scent – “The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume” John writes.

I mean, you simply open one of the cupboards in the Sacristy and you can smell the Chrism oil we have for anointing and there's maybe 6 oz or so in a jug in there. My nose tingles imagining the scent of a pound of nard poured out all at once.

I also also imagine the wet, slick hands of Mary as she wipes Jesus' feet and her hair getting more and more soaked as she uses more and more strands to wipe the oil away.

I am in awe of the commitment and passion that drives her to stride into that room with such purpose and vision to offer this wildly extravagant offering – knowing deep down in her own body that this was absolutely the right thing to do in the moment.

To love on her friend, her Lord – Jesus – with all that she had and all that she was. To care for him in his moment of incredible need.

And, boy, did he need it!

Dr. Karoline Lewis of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN wrote in a reflection of this text that “Mary's extravagant love for Jesus makes it possible for Jesus 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 loves Jesus into his future as the fulfillment of, ‘for God so loved the world.’”¹

Mary loved Jesus into his future – with her whole body, mind, and spirit, Mary offered all that she could so that her friend felt that love through all his upcoming trials and tribulations.

Mary loved Jesus into his future, as Dr. Lewis wrote “I think he felt once again Mary's love, her gentle touch, when he was beaten. I think he held on to Mary's love, desperately, when he hung on that cross...And, then, I think Jesus took all of that love into the tomb, all of that love that would then love him into his future as the resurrection and the life.”

Mary's story is the story of extravagant, embodied love because Jesus' story is one of extravagant, embodied love – what is often thought of as unidirectional – Jesus toward us – Mary proves is mutual.

¹ Lewis, Karoline. “Loved into Future.” *Working Preacher*. April 1, 2019 <<https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/loved-into-future>>

Mary's actions compel me – I feel drawn to wonder what I offer to Jesus, and not just in part, but in full – full, extravagant, embodied love because I too have received that love from Jesus.

It's like my heart feels this tether pulling it out of my chest and toward the world – I wonder if that's how Mary felt, too.

Jesus' extravagant, embodied love definitely loves us into our own future, and are we not called to love Jesus, love God's creation, into its own future – the one that resembles God's kin-dom on earth as it is in heaven.

To love God's creation into its own future of life, abundant life, because "God so loved the world".

How blessed! How wondrous! How absolutely necessary!

In a world that is rarely compelled by love and more often compelled by selfishness, power, and privilege.

A world wounded by the ravages of war, destruction, hate, and bigotry.

A world that glimpses love on occasion but as a whole is deficient of this nutrient.

A world that needs to be loved into its future – a neighbor who needs to be loved through their cancer diagnosis – a country that needs to be loved into peace.

A world that needs to be loved as Jesus loved it.

Be frivolous in your love, my friends – love extravagantly! Love without reservation! Love without restriction! Love yourself into bravery for the sake of more love! Love when the world doesn't expect it! Love with your whole body – your whole person – your whole self!

Do you not sense that God is calling you forward in love!

May this compulsion to love extravagantly never be quelled!

Amen.