

Mary's Extravagant Love
John 12:1-8
Rev. Don J. Best
5th Sunday in Lent
Bethel Presbyterian Church
April 7, 2019

Our gospel reading for this Fifth Sunday in Lent, is John, chapter 12, verses 1 through 8. This reading should sound familiar, because it is similar to passages in the other three gospels. The various stories differ in where, when, how, and who is involved, but all of them are about the anointing of Jesus. John's story is just before the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, so it is particularly appropriate for this 5th Sunday in Lent. But, as we will see there are other matters that tie it to the events of the time Jesus and his disciples will spend in Jerusalem. Listen now to the story of a dinner in the home of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus:

Gospel Reading

^{12:1} Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ² There they gave a dinner for him.

Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.

³ 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.

⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" ⁶ (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.)

⁷ Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸ 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.

Sermon

In the Gospel of John, Martha, her sister Mary, and their brother Lazarus play a significant role. There were, apparently, good friends of Jesus. Good enough friends to say that Jesus loved them. Martha contacted Jesus when Lazarus became ill, and had faith that Jesus could help, even after Lazarus had died. Of course, we know the outcome of that story. But you may not remember that it was after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, when the leaders of the

synagogue decided that Jesus must die to protect the nation of Israel. That was in chapter 11 and now, in chapter 12, Jesus returns to Bethany, and to the house of Lazarus, where Martha served them dinner, but it was Mary who became the center of attention.

"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."

Mary steps out of the traditional role of a woman, to anoint the feet of Jesus with a ridiculous amount of extremely valuable perfume. Then, she steps even farther over social boundaries and uses her hair to wipe Jesus' feet. A young Jewish woman should never let her hair down in front of a man, unless he was her husband.

Then Judas speaks up: "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"

The narrator of the story gives us more information about Judas. We are given his full name, Judas Iscariot, and we are informed that he was the one who would betray Jesus. We are told that he was a thief, because his objection over the extravagant gift of Mary was not that the money would better serve the poor, but that he, "kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it."

The extravagant love of Mary shines even brighter when it is cast against the self-centered deceit of Judas. Mary's discipleship is enlarged by the false discipleship of Judas, one of the twelve. The non-traditional female disciple pours out her love for Jesus, as she poured out the vial of valuable perfume.

But there is much more going on at this dinner party in the house of Lazarus. The events of that evening foreshadow events that are to come. John tells us that this dinner was six days before the Passover. In the Gospel of John, another dinner will happen before the Passover. A dinner where Jesus will be the host. A dinner when Jesus will call out the one who is to betray him, Judas Iscariot.

But more importantly to this reading, the dinner to come, is the one when Jesus will stand up, and kneel down at the feet of his disciples to wash their feet. Jesus will take on the role of servant and show his disciples that they must be servants if they are to lead in his church.

The dinner to come is when Jesus, will tell his disciples to do as he did, to love as he loved. These things are the marks of real discipleship: serving and loving one another, and all of God's children.

But here in our reading. Six days before the Passover, in the house of Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead, the young woman Mary, without uttering a single word, demonstrated this important teaching of Jesus, even before he taught it to his disciples. Her extravagant act of love preceded the lesson for the twelve. Her act of love serves as an example for all of us; demonstrating the kind of love that we have for the Son of God who came to save us. The kind of love that we should have for one another, and the kind of love that we should have for all of God's children.

But there is still more going on at this dinner party. Jesus respond to Judas:

"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."

In his response, Jesus reminds the disciples that his time is short, that his hour is coming, and that Mary's extravagant act serves to anoint his body, as his hour is drawing near, and they will not always have him with them.

Eleven days from now, on Maundy Thursday, we will again gather together and hear the story of that dinner with Jesus and his disciples. We will hear how Jesus assumes the role of servant and washes the feet of his disciples. We will hear him tell them that in order to be his disciples they should do likewise, and you should think back to this Sunday, to this reading when Mary was the one who anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped them dry with her hair. And on Maundy Thursday, we will hear Jesus give his disciples a new commandment to love one another, as he has loved them, and you should think back to this Sunday and the extravagant love that Mary showed Jesus, the one who brought her brother back to life, and the one who would give his life for her.

But you don't have to wait eleven days either, in just a few minutes we will gather around another table, for another meal, and we will hear how Jesus gave his body for us. How he spilled his blood for us. We will hear the words, and taste the meal that Jesus prepares for us. And you should remember the meal that the Lord shared in the home of Lazarus, where Martha served them, and Mary showed her extravagant love. For the time is coming soon, when we will remember and experience once again the love that the Lord has for us, and the extravagant gift of his love and grace for all of us.

Let us pray: Loving God, the gospel story is about your love for us, and the gift of your Son. Help us to follow the example of Mary; to love as extravagantly as she loved. In the days to come we will hear of the self-sacrifice of your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us to think back to the sacrifice of Mary, her anointing, and her loving. Amen.