

A Sermon for Lent 5 2022 for the ECMN
Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8
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My Grandma Goldman's house was always full of good smells. A German Lutheran from a Wisconsin farm family, she escaped to Milwaukee during the Second World War and eloped with my Jewish Grandfather. My grandma was a gifted cook who quickly learned to make the foods my grandfather craved: potato latkes and fried motzas cooked in lots of butter. She introduced my sister and me to these dishes as well as to lox and gefilte fish. I have to admit, when I first saw the jar of gefilte fish in her refrigerator, I thought it was a science project gone awry.

To me, Grandma Goldman's home was what love smelled like. It was the smell of onions and spices, and it always made you hungry and expectant about the coming meal. It was the smell of someone doing something for you, reminding you that you were special and loved. I wonder what scents bring back similar memories for you?

[PAUSE]

In today's Gospel from John we have an astonishing, even shocking scene. As Jesus is eating dinner in her home, Mary, Lazarus's sister, anoints his feet with a pound of costly perfume. John tells us that, "the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume." The cost of the perfume was 300 denarii, almost the yearly income of a manual laborer. Mary not only anoints Jesus' feet with the perfume, she proceeds to wipe his feet with her hair. Her gesture is intimate and, if we're honest, embarrassing. Mary makes herself vulnerable in front of everyone gathered at Lazarus' home for dinner. Why does she do this? **[PAUSE]**

Just before this scene Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. The resuscitation of Lazarus is an important moment in John's Gospel. It causes numerous onlookers to believe that Jesus is an important prophet or perhaps the long-promised Messiah. It's also the moment in which those who are threatened by Jesus and by what Rome will do to squelch the growing number of people following Jesus resolve to stop him. Jesus' decision to restore a friend to life sets off a chain of events leading to his death. We're just days away from Passover and Jesus' mock trial and crucifixion.

In ancient Palestine anointings took place at coronations and burials. It's as if Mary is simultaneously highlighting Jesus' kingship and impending death. She's loving Jesus with her whole self, at the potential expense of her reputation. God uses Mary to fill the air with an overwhelming scent which will carry Jesus to the grave and beyond. The scent of the perfume, like Jesus' eventual resurrection, overwhelms the smell of death and decay. Lazarus' presence at the dinner table symbolizes Jesus' victory of life over death, and the promise of new life to all who are willing to take a risk and believe.

What enabled Mary to be so vulnerable, willing to give so much money and to put her reputation on the line? A clue may be found in today's letter from Paul to the Christians at Philippi. Paul, formerly a Pharisee steeped in the Jewish law, and with an excellent pedigree and reputation had a life-changing encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. This encounter was so powerful that he was able to give up his status and former identity. In his letter to the Philippians Paul writes, "yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. . .

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”

In the second chapter of Philippians Paul lays out the new, cruciform pattern of life to which he is called – the pattern embodied by Jesus. It is one in which any privileges or protections are set aside in order to participate in God’s work to serve and bring healing to others. The pattern of self-emptying in which we become vulnerable for the sake of another is the pattern Mary embodies as she wipes Jesus’ perfume-soaked feet with her hair. The Greek verb John uses here for “wiped” is the same one he uses when Jesus’ washes his disciples’ feet, the event we’ll remember and re-enact on Maundy Thursday. Mary is engaging in a profound act of discipleship, leading the way by loving Jesus lavishly. Her ability to love Jesus extravagantly, and his extravagant love for her, will enable her to love others the same way.

When I and others have sat with this story there is usually confusion over Jesus’ words, “You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.” Understood literally, these words are out of character with Jesus’ life and ministry. Now, let me be clear. I am not siding with Judas. He is virtue signaling. Judas is more concerned about his reputation and how others perceive him than for the poor. His words are empty because they come from a place of judgment rather than love.

When we survey the entirety of Jesus’ life and ministry, it is all about bringing good news in tangible ways to the poor. So hearing these words as Jesus not caring about the poor are simply wrong. Jesus’ words actually echo Deuteronomy 15 “since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth . . . I therefore command you,

‘Open your hand to the poor and needy in your land.’” Jesus’ seemingly troubling words can also be translated “have the poor with you always” or “keep the poor among you always.” These translations align with what we know of Jesus and his vision of God’s Reign.

We are no strangers to death and decay. These last two years have been hard and humbling. And yet, we are not without hope. In Jesus the scent of new life overwhelms the scent of death. Whatever we have done or left undone, Jesus offers us the possibility of a loving relationship with God and our neighbors. Mary’s extravagant act of love and discipleship is in stark contrast to Judas, who says the right things but acts from a place of anger, disappointment, and scarcity. As we approach Holy Week, how might we trust and embrace God’s promise captured in the words of the Prophet Isaiah, “I am about to do a new thing . . . I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”

In the silence that follows I invite you to ponder the new thing God is about to do in your life, in your faith community, and in our midst.

If you are watching this video with a group, I encourage you to share your thoughts with others after observing a period of silent reflection.