

April 3, 2022 – Fifth Sunday of Lent

¹Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ²There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³Mary 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. ⁴But 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.) ⁷Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

There's something about these Lenten Sunday stories.

More often than not, the obvious "bad guy" seems to have a valid point.

Whether it's the Devil offering a shortcut to Jesus' reign over the whole, broken, beat-down world ... the obedient elder son who watched little brother always make the wrong choice and be treated like a returning hero when he finally figures it out for once ... or Judas when he points out the wastefulness of Mary's costly demonstration.

A cold, emotionless assessment of the facts of each case can easily produce a verdict in favor of those voice of

apparent reason. If a denarius is a day's wage and one day a week is devoted to Sabbath, we are looking at close to a year's salary in perfume splashed on Jesus' feet in an instant. Jesus never demonstrates a taste for that kind of luxury throughout the Gospels. Houses weren't so big in that time and place so this can't be all that pleasant for the nostrils of all those present, can it? I imagine an effect sort of like you'd get if you were driving a carload of junior high school boys who overdid it on the cologne to the nth degree before you drop them off at their first school dance.

Sure, John gives us the parenthetical that Judas is not being sincere in his concerns. But if he weren't able to get his greedy fingers on it, couldn't that money indeed have been put to better use to help the many in need of a meal, clothing, shelter, healing?

Perhaps. But the question is not raised until what's done is done. There's no mopping up the spill and putting

the perfume back in the bottle. If it could be done over again, might Mary have been convinced to do otherwise? Who knows. But we hear from Jesus no interest in what might have been. Only what is.

As he demonstrated in the desert, motivation is everything in God's eyes. Mary's heart was absolutely in the right place. In fact, it's quite possible her act of humbling service and devotion may be what inspires Jesus to don a towel and kneel down to wash his disciples' feet just a few nights later.

A week ago yesterday, a group of us sat down to talk about the proposition that "tears fall for a reason and they are your strength, not your weakness." Those were the words of the author Charles Mackesy but they are words Mary would have deeply understood. And Jesus would have as well. The vulnerability and dedication she shared with him in that setting took on a life of its own.

God doesn't seem to be all that into the utilitarian school of ethics, simply accounting for outcomes that produce the greatest outcome for the greatest number. I find that frustrating because it seems quite logical to just plug in the numbers when in doubt. And surely there are times when that way of thinking and what God wills will reflect one another. But it's not an automatic. God is not a formula. And God does not simply create and apply formulas to bring about whatever God wants to see happen.

Jesus shows us a God who is intimate, relational and incarnate. There could have been some serious shock value not only in Mary's choice of anointing oil quality and quantity but in the manner of how she applies it. To let down her hair and rub it on her rabbi's feet is culturally shameful. There might very well have been gasps about the room ... and then maybe some coughing because of the overpowering fragrance.

But Jesus is not so easily upset by such a display. He is not moved by the indignity of improper decorum. I am sure he isn't moved by the luxury of the substance. He is evidently moved by love. By the clear intention of a devoted follower to savor a moment, one they don't have too many more of left.

Don't criticize this act of love, Jesus says, and shifts the attention from a lifeless consideration of economic discipline to the elephant in the room. Death. Namely Jesus' impending death on the Roman cross. But death that cannot be separated from life.

Who is there with them, in the room and at the table but Lazarus? One who was dead but whom Jesus raised back to life. You know how a smell can trigger a memory? What grandma's cooking conjured up. The kind of cigars your grandfather smoked. The time your dog rolled around in fish washed up on the beach. Yeah, it's not always a good

memory. What must it have been for Lazarus to smell perfumes for the care of the body after death, having woken to that scent mostly overpowered by his four days spent in the tomb? And especially to know his friend and Savior was about to experience it all for himself.

It seems like it would be just too much. There's a lot of just too much these days. War in Ukraine, tense political deadlocks, inflation, inequality, inhumanity ...

"You always have the poor with you," Jesus said. "But you do not always have me."

It might sound callous. But this is not a free pass to forget the poor. Jesus spoke to his own generation and he speaks to ours. He guarantees we will always have neighbors in need to whom God's love calls us to attend. There is always work that can and needs to be done under the reign of Christ.

But there's no shame in tuning it all out for just a moment now and again to have an intimate encounter with Jesus. To pour out tears in gratitude for his sacrifice, to praise him for all he's already done ... even to be mad at him for finding no other way than the cross to bring about salvation. It doesn't have to be logical.

It just needs to be honest. It needs to be real.

That is life ... and it does not cower in the face of death.

Thanks be to God.