

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
5 Lent – April 3, 2022
John 12:1-8 – Mary anoints Jesus
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This morning we begin our walk with Jesus to Jerusalem and to the cross. He has arrived in Bethany, a town about two miles outside of Jerusalem, six days before the Passover, when Jesus would eat the Last Supper with his disciples. He had time to visit some of his dearest friends – Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, sisters and brother. The gospels record a number of significant encounters among these friends. At the beginning of this morning's lesson John refers to the time when Jesus had arrived too late to heal Lazarus of his illness and he had died. Jesus wept in grief for his friend and then raised him from the dead.

Jesus loved these friends and they loved him. So, when he arrived in Bethany, his friends gave a dinner for him. Mary, the woman who had sat at Jesus' feet to learn all he could teach her about God, now kneels at his feet to anoint them. She had spent three hundred denarii on perfume. A denarius was one day's wages for a laborer. So she had spent an entire year's wages on this perfume! Mary poured out this costly perfume to anoint the man who had raised her dead brother to life and who would pour out his own life in just a few days.

This scene of love being expressed so extravagantly is broken into by Judas Iscariot. He objects to Mary's extravagance in terms that Jesus might have found acceptable: "Why was this perfume not sold ... and the money given to the poor?" During his years of ministry hadn't Jesus taught over and over again about caring for the poor? Wouldn't this money have been put to better use for their welfare? John explains what was wrong with Judas' objection: "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." Judas had no love for the poor. Though he was one of his disciples, Judas had no love for Jesus, whom he would soon betray. Jesus silences Judas by saying that Mary had bought the perfume to anoint him for burial.

Jesus said, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." In these words, he is referring to the Hebrew Bible, as he so often did. In the book of Deuteronomy (15:7, 11) we find this commandment of God regarding the poor. "If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. 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 neighbor in your land.'"

In his reply to Judas, Jesus is not denying God's command to care for the poor. His words recorded in Mark's gospel (14:7) make his point more clearly than John's gospel does: "For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me." The time when anyone could show their love for Jesus directly, in his body, is nearly at an end. The time left is as precious as Mary's gift of perfume.

One of the last acts of Jesus' life reminds us of Mary's anointing his feet. The night before he died, during supper with his disciples, Jesus "got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him." After he had done this, he instructed his disciples that he had given them an example to follow, to serve one another in humility and love. (John 13:4-5, 12-14). Then, on the cross, Jesus completed his life of pouring himself out for love of God and God's people.

The contrast between Mary and Judas in this short passage is striking. Why such extravagant love of Jesus from one and betrayal of Jesus from the other? Mary and Judas had each known Jesus for a long time – heard his teaching, watched him perform miracles, witnessed him using his power for the good of others, known him to worship God in public and to seek solitude for prayer. Each knew the same man, but they made choices that led them to treat Jesus very differently. Why? We don't know, of course. But we might wonder.

We do know that Mary's heart was filled with gratitude to Jesus for bringing her brother out of the tomb of death to life. And this is important. Gratitude to God for the blessings God has so abundantly given us has great power to deepen our faith and trust in God. Giving thanks to God for God's blessings helps us to receive God's blessings more deeply, to treasure them and ponder them in our hearts. Gratitude for the saving work of God in our lives can become a well-spring of our love for God which leads us to share our blessings with people in need, people who have not been blessed as abundantly as we have been.

What we see in the relationship between Mary and Jesus is love given, love received, and love returned. Treasured love between Jesus and Mary – the rabbi, the master and one of his true disciples.

What about Judas? In the passage we are considering we learn that Judas was a thief. But John makes it clear earlier in the gospel that Judas had not truly believed in Jesus' message (John 6:64). That was the true problem. Though Judas continued to travel with Jesus, he was not on Jesus' side, and in the end, he would betray Jesus.

Last week we considered the Parable of the Prodigal Son, which might more accurately be called the Parable of the Loving Father. This parable shows us the extravagant love of the Father for his sons. The parable reveals the contrast between the repentant younger son who received his father's love with gratitude and the elder son who had never understood his father and his father's love and who refused to join the celebration for his brother's return from death to life.

This morning we learn more about extravagant love. Not only the love of Jesus which will be poured out on the cross, but the love of his true disciple and friend, Mary, who spends a year's wages on perfume for anointing his feet.

It is still the season of Lent, still the time when we are called to repentance. In light of this morning's reading from John's gospel, we might give thought to ourselves, our discipleship, our friendship with Jesus. Are we giving our love extravagantly in return for God's extravagant love and mercy? Is there something in our hearts and souls that keeps us from love, that keeps us from being totally on Jesus' side? If so, can we heed God's call to turn back, to love God with all our hearts and all our souls and all our minds and to love our neighbors as ourselves? God's open arms are ready to receive us. May God's holy name be praised! In Jesus' name. Amen.