

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent (Year C)

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*John 12:1-8*

*Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 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. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' (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.) Jesus said, '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.'*

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Gary was a gentle soul, so gentle in fact that I often wondered if he was faking it. But he wasn't. He was just that kind. Some people have had hard lives and it seems to make them calloused, cynical, and cruel. Gary, for some reason I never quite understood, appeared to be the exact opposite. Gary had had a difficult life, experiencing homelessness after coming back to the United States after serving a tour or two in Vietnam. And though I tried to find a mean bone in his body, after several months I gave up my futile attempts.

Gary's kindness, however, was not enough to keep him from dying. By the time I got to know him, his health was declining and he began about a year and a half slow and tortuous march to his death. For the last year of his life, Gary was stuck in a veterans hospital on Long Island, receiving his nutrition from a feeding tube and his oxygen from a trach tube inserted into his neck. He could neither speak nor eat. But he could smile, and after a while, I was able to understand most of his words by him mouthing them.

After a year or so, his body and soul had had enough. He was ready to let go. And so, after he had slipped into a coma for a few days, I gathered with his family to anoint him with oil and turn off his life support. We stood around his hospital bed, young and old, and I began the words of prayer from our Presbyterian liturgy. I took a vial of oil of frankincense and myrrh just like this one and smeared a generous amount on his forehead as the scent filled the room.

I will not try to describe the moment when he died. For those of you who have witnessed someone die before your eyes, you know that it is the holiest of moments. I simply held his hand and told him over and over that he was loved and that God would greet him as a friend and that nothing in this life or the next could snatch him from the arms of his Savior. His other hand was held by his daughter. His son caressed the hair upon his head and the rest of them touched his legs and feet as he died.

It was just as holy of a moment, if not more so, than any I've experienced in a sanctuary. But who's to say that a hospital room cannot be a sanctuary? We knew in that exact moment that nothing else mattered in the world but what was happening right here in front of our eyes. Yes, there was much brokenness "out there," but,

for us, it could wait. Right now, the most important thing in the world was for us to sing our friend, our father, on his way to heaven.

For the rest of my life, I will likely be reminded of that story whenever I'm called to preach on today's passage from John's Gospel. Jesus had gathered in an intimate space with his friends. He was with people who, as Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, knew him not just as a messiah but as a man. In this room, with his closest friends, he could simply be human for only a moment. He knew his days were numbered. He knew that raising Lazarus from the grave put a target on his head and that he was marching to *his* grave. So, for a moment, before returning to his painful journey, he could - for once - be ministered to instead of ministering to others.

Martha, of course, was busy doing the dishes. Lazarus was silent, perhaps still standing in amazement of the fact that only a few days ago he was deader than a doornail. Mary, however, did something quite different. She gave thanks for, blessed, and broke open a container of costly perfume, and began to anoint Jesus' feet. Her loving act was both provocative and prophetic. Provocative because she is doing such an intimate and sensual act of devotion and love. Prophetic because of where she is anointing Jesus. Kings get anointed on the head. But the only people who get anointed on the feet are ones who are dead.

And this perfumed oil is no cheap cologne that you get for a quarter in a public restroom. This bottle of nard had been purchased for 300 denarii. That was enough for a day laborer and his family to live off of *for one whole year*. Judas was the first to speak up. He speaks what I'm sure everyone else in the room was already thinking.

“How dare you waste such oil? It could have been sold to feed hundreds of people.”

Of course, you and I both know that his objections were far from philanthropic.

But regardless of his intentions, his remarks bring to light the abundance of Mary's prophetic offering. But then Jesus - the ultimate champion of the poor - rebukes Judas and defends Mary, telling them that they will always have the poor but they will not always have him.

Barbara Brown Taylor suggests the following in her sermon on this text called “The Prophet Mary:” So Mary proceeded to rub his feet with ointment so precious that its sale might have fed a poor family for a year, an act so lavish that it suggests another layer to her prophecy. There will be nothing prudent or economical about the death of this man, just as there has been nothing prudent or economical about his life. In him, the extravagance of God's love is made flesh. In him, the excessiveness of God's mercy is made manifest. This bottle will not be held back to be kept and admired. This precious substance will not be saved. It will be opened, offered, and used, at great price. It will be raised up and poured out for all humankind, emptied to the last drop?”

Mary was a prophet because she acted out in a manner that draws our attention to the divine. Time and time again, prophets like her calls us to cultivate mindfulness when Christ is right before us. And we do this by following the prophet's lead and ignore the craziness that seeks to distract us from what is really important in our lives.

This passage makes me wonder how many times I've lacked Mary's wisdom and allowed the craziness of the world to keep me from seeing what is most important in front of my eyes. Part of the journey of Lent is

that it prepares us to see Christ in the world, to act as Mary did and lavish love upon the people around us in which we meet Christ face to face.

Perhaps Martha finally put down the dishes and decided to be present with her friend who was soon to die.

Perhaps Judas saw a glimpse of holiness in the man he was about to betray.

Perhaps Lazarus finally understood the price that was about to be paid for his life.

Perhaps we might look upon the prophet Mary and learn to cultivate mindfulness of the holy. For today, we are in that room. We are in this intimate space in which our savior is about to make his final steps to the cross.

As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, there is nothing frugal about the love of God. *That* is the truth that the Mary points us to with her prophetic anointing. So, whether we are in a sanctuary, the workplace, the hospital room, the homeless shelter, or the classroom, may we follow her lead to set aside the craziness and cultivate the mindfulness to be present in God's extravagant love.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.