

John 12:1-8
March 13, 2016
Lent 5 – Year C

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

The room is silent as a handful of family members sit around the bedside of a dying husband and father. A wife sat by her husband of 52 years and then pulled herself up out of the chair she had been occupying for so many hours. She went to her purse and took out a bottle of lotion. Time and age had taken a toll on her own hands and getting the cap off the bottle was no easy task but finally she did it. She squeezed the bottle and slowly a bit of lotion came out on one of her wrinkled and worn hands. Thinking she was going to simply rub the lotion into those hands nobody much paid attention; however, they did (pay attention) when she shuffled along the edge of the bed and came to where her husband's feet lay sticking out from the blankets. In those last few days those feet had become almost void of any color of life in them as his failing heart simply was not working at full capacity and strength to push blood to his extremities. Ever so slowly she rubbed the lotion between her own hands and then took hold of those feet gently and lovingly rubbed the lotion into those dry, cracked, and seemingly lifeless feet massaging them for minutes at a time. She would then return to the bottle for more lotion, and begin again. No one dared move and you could scarcely hear the sound of anyone breathing in the room as all eyes were on this beautiful act of love. The sweet aroma of the lotion permeated the room after several minutes mesmerizing everyone nearly as much as what they were witnessing. In the midst of death entered one of the most beautiful and touching acts anyone had ever witnessed bringing the very real presence of God's love into their midst.

This scene was not all different from a scene two thousand years before it. Try to picture it in your head as you are able. You have been invited to be a guest at a meal on the heels of a miraculous story that happened just days before. The reports are Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus' sister Martha apparently said to Jesus, "Lord, already there is a stench because he (Lazarus) has been dead four days." (John 11:39) You have heard of the eye-witness reports of Jesus telling Lazarus to come out of his tomb and he did with "his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth." And now here you are with the one that was previously dead sitting at the table across from you. Next to you is Lazarus' sister Mary. His other sister Martha is busy in the kitchen preparing a wonderful meal for the guest of honor, Jesus, whom gave back to her the life of her brother. She is rolling out the hospitality band-wagon and serving Jesus the only way she knows how. Also, joined is a cast of Jesus' followers – disciples you have heard them called. They have been travelling through the sweltering heat, along dusty paths, toward Jerusalem and the festival of the Passover.

After dinner is served you notice Mary reach for a bottle. What could it be? And then seemingly without thinking she kneels at the feet of Jesus and begins to pour the thick liquid from the bottle onto his feet and rubs them with her hands. And before you can even put a hand over your gasping mouth she bows her head, lets down her hair, and begins to wipe his feet with her hair. What is she doing? This is scandalous. Women do not anoint the feet of a man or let down their hair in public and they certainly do not do it to a man they are not married to. As your eyes remain wide and fixated on the scene, suddenly the room becomes filled with the sweetest smell you have ever experienced. Its fragrance is captivating and for a moment you completely forget about the scent of stinking sweaty and dirty bodies and the

lingering scent of death which had also still permeated this confined space. Whatever this act Mary is doing has completely transformed the air of the room. You breathe deeply and the intoxication of the floral fragrance fills your entire body.

And then you hear one of the disciples, Judas, question, “What are you thinking? Why dare you waste this expensive perfume in this way? We could have sold it and given the money to the poor.” You later come to find out that what Mary had poured from the body was fragrant oil made from pure nard costing nearly 300 denarii, roughly one year’s worth of wages. You can’t help to think back upon it and ask the same questions Judas did, “What was she thinking?” “Who in their right mind would make such a choice?”

There is no question that what Mary does is one of extravagance. Is it dramatic and exceeding the limits of reason or necessity? Is it lacking in moderation, balance, or restraint? Is it extremely or unreasonably high in price? On all accounts we could make the argument that the answer is definitively “yes.” Mary’s actions are extravagant. She ignores proper customs of the day and gives extraordinarily because she knows that the one at whose feet she kneels deserves an act of extravagant holiness. Unlike most everyone else at this point of John’s gospel, Mary knows what Jesus is about to do. Mary prepares his body for the death which awaits him just days away through this act of service full of love. She foreshadows Jesus who will soon be kneeling before His disciple’s feet washing them and drawing them into an even closer relationship and fuller understanding of who He is, what He has come to do, and what true discipleship looks like through how He serves them, others, and ultimately gives His life away for the world. Jesus’ love is extravagant. Through this most extravagant gift of love God in Christ transforms the stench of death into the sweet smell of life. Mary’s expression of love is

done out of response to the One who brought her dead brother back to life. It is done by foreseeing what this One will do next in Jerusalem. It is done from the state of a humble spirit, an intimate expression of devotion, the finest gift – how could she give anything less to the one who taught her of God’s love as she sat at his feet, whose feet she now caressed? Indeed, how can we give anything less than our best gifts to the one who has given his life for us?

Clearly, the gospel writers found the rich symbolism and meaning behind this story. They saw the beauty in it and the love behind it. They saw the contrast between the faithfulness of this woman and the betrayal and ugliness of Judas’ response. Each author included this story, which is very rare given only a handful of accounts are found in all four gospels. While they each tell in slightly differently, the fact remains this story of love, extravagance, and giving survived and continued to be shared. We need stories such as this. We need stories such as the devoted wife massaging the feet of her dying husband. Especially, in a world where what we all too often the actions we see and voices we hear continue to be ones of hate, intolerance, racism, and fear. These actions and voices are quite the opposite of what we find in this scene today and the life of service Jesus lived with every ounce of his being until he revealed the ultimate act of love on the cross. The gospel we hear and read each and every Sunday is of stark contrast to what we see lived out so often on our television screens, front pages of the newspaper, and in our world. This gospel message is for all people. This Savior doesn’t discriminate based on wealth, status, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, race, or religion. This Savior is the One we are called to follow, to trust in, to model our lives after, to seek strength in, and to be so moved by His extravagant acts of love and grace for not just some people but for all people that we too respond in love and service to all.