

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

Sermon Reflection Notes

It is fascinating to experience this story from the gospel of John, sandwiched between the story of resurrection (Lazarus) and the story about leaders in Jerusalem plotting to kill Jesus. To hear this story, set in Bethany, at the home of good friends like Martha, Mary and Lazarus, with preparations for a family meal is to wonder what it would be like to be at that table. What would it be like to be at the table with the resurrected? What would it be like to be close family friends eating a good meal together, celebrating Lazarus' presence and yet knowing that just a couple miles away there are threats of violence and death? What would it mean to pause the journey to Jerusalem to remember together and to receive strength and joy from each other?

We can imagine the scene: Martha is serving, bringing out platters of food and filling glasses with wine; Lazarus and Jesus having a side conversation; the disciples talking across the table. And then Mary comes in and she wildly, lavishly, irresponsibly, wastefully, imprudently, recklessly pours out a ridiculous amount of perfume on Jesus' feet and wipes them clean with her hair.

Judas, the treasurer (who is also skimming funds) points out how wasteful Mary's actions are; he asks, smugly, if it wouldn't have been better to sell the \$60,000 worth of perfume and give the money to the poor. But Jesus defends Mary; "Leave her alone!" he says. Jesus knows exactly why Mary bought the perfume and reminds Judas (and the rest gathered there) that the poor will always be with them, but he will not.

We hear the same critique of the church sometimes. Wouldn't it be better to take the money spent on the church building, the programs, etc. and give it to the poor? Isn't it wasteful to spend all that money on the trappings of church instead of the work of church? But the building and the things we do in them are important. It is in spaces of the church that we are given the opportunity to eat with the crucified, dead, buried, and resurrected Jesus. We sing songs with angels in these spaces. We pass on the wisdom and relationships that affirm our baptismal vows to serve the living God, resist evil, and serve the least of these. We rejoice at new life and mourn the dead here. While it may seem foolish to spend lots of money here, we passionately worship in ways that seem irresponsible and undignified because Jesus is with us. This is the place where we, like Mary, proverbially pour out our perfume.

It is Mary who offers a prophetic act in this scripture. Her act foreshadows Jesus' impending death. She acknowledges what the disciples could not: the death of their teacher, their friend, the Messiah. Mary symbolically covers the stench of death in that living room. She demonstrates the extravagance of human love by pouring out her whole self—financial, social,

emotional—in a gesture of sheer beauty. She demonstrates prodigal extravagance of divine love as a precursor to Jesus. Because isn't that what Jesus does in death? Pours out his whole self for the sake of love—pouring out a life that is worth infinitely more than a bottle of perfume.

We are dust and to dust we shall return. In this scripture, Jesus is confronted with his own mortality. But Mary makes something beautiful out of the dust. We journey towards Jerusalem with Jesus during Lent. And the body of Jesus, dripping with oil, is the ultimate reminder that death will not have the final word. Death will give way to life, and God will make beautiful things out of the dust once more.

Scripture

John 12:1-8 (NRSVUE)

¹Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ² There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him. ³ Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus's feet, and wiped them[a] with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴ But 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.) ⁷ Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸ You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Discussion Questions

1. Why do we come to church on Sunday mornings? Especially during Lent or during difficult times?
2. Who was at the dinner with Jesus in this scripture story? What were their 'roles'? (host, honored guest, comic relief, etc.)
3. How were Mary, Martha, and Lazarus helping Jesus even though they couldn't stop what was going to happen? What is the antidote to cynicism or despair?
4. The cost of doing worship the way we do at Manchester UMC is hundreds of thousands of dollars every year. What are the benefits of spending that kind of money on worship spaces, programming, music, staff, etc.?
5. Jesus took time to celebrate the resurrection of his friend Lazarus with close friends and family. He took time for joy. What is joy? How does it come into our lives? How is joy also resistance to evil? How do we find joy and pass it on?

6. This is a 'dusty' story and yet there is something beautiful happening in what Mary did. What does it mean to 'make beautiful things out of the dust?' How do we participate in that transformation?

Closing Prayer

O God, the gospel witnesses tell us stories of lavish generosity, prodigal extravagant love for us, and we are grateful. We are no match for your goodness and mercy, and yet you continue to welcome us into your family and call us to love each other. So even when we face a world of fear and injustice, help us remember that joy in your creative power is the strongest resistance for all that is wrong. Help us, in thankfulness, to tell your story and to live your gifts as a gift to the world. We pray this in the name of Jesus the Christ, who leads us still. Amen.

"God is making beautiful things out of the dust."