

1 Six 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 at the table with him. 3 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. 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."

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

FIRST READING: Philippians 3:10-14

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10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, 11 if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. 12 Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

“Enduring Fragrance”

For the final 7 years of her life, my grandmother lived with my family. After my two older sisters left home, their room became hers, just down the hall from mine. She passed away 3 months before Mike & I were married. I had spent many an hour at her feet, hearing her stories, often the same ones, as she crocheted another pillow case or lap blanket. I have fond memories of times with her. I carried the Bible she gave me in lieu of a bouquet of flowers when I was married. After she died, I recall that I would sometimes open her closet where her remaining clothes and a few things were still stored and there I'd just sniff. I could smell her. The soap she used, her shampoo...I could smell her there. I was comforted. “Scientists say that while words are recognized by the cognitive part of the brain, odors-fragrances go to the emotional part, the amygdala”.¹ That's why for a brief moment a whiff of her fragrance brought back the grandmother I loved so much and who loved me.

We leave the gospel of Luke to today read from John. Jesus was seeking refuge back in Bethany, about 4 miles from Jerusalem, at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. He had been there days earlier to perform one of his greatest miracles, the raising of Lazarus. The news of his miracle had travelled, and Jesus had now graduated from what's been called a “manageable nuisance” to serious threat” in the eyes of the chief priests.² And they were intent on getting rid of him. They were threatening to kill even Lazarus because he was living evidence of the miracle. So, Mary, Martha and Lazarus were laying low and giving Jesus and his disciples safety in their home. And it seems that when they were all gathered for supper, Mary did something remarkable. She left and came back holding a jar in her hands. It was very, very, very expensive perfume, valued at 300 dinarii, almost a year's salary, since one denarii was a day's wage. In today's currency, it was probably worth about \$10-20,000! Very precious perfume. Without speaking, she knelt at Jesus' feet and broke it open. Its scent was strong, something halfway between mint and ginseng.³ Then, she let down her hair, which a woman

¹ Blair Monie. “A Lingering Fragrance” day1.org/7125-a_lingering_fragrance.print (accessed 4-4-19).

² Barbara Brown Taylor. “The Prophet Mary” http://day1.org/1760-the_prophet_mary (accessed 4-4-19).

³ Barbara Brown Taylor.

really should not do in front of men, and she poured the perfume on Jesus' feet. If she'd poured it on his head, it might have made some sense as that was what one would do to anoint a king, but the feet? NO, you'd only do that to a dead person. Could it be that Mary understood what was about to happen? Then she, a single woman, rubbed his feet, also not done, even among friends, and she wiped the perfume off with her hair. The strong fragrance filled the room, and I imagine that if any windows were open, it wafted out into the area around the house. It was a very remarkable scene for sure.

Now...I want to take a quick sidestep to make sure there's no confusion on something which tends to be confusing. There are 3 other accounts in the Bible that are similar to this. The first two are in Matthew and Mark wherein an UNNAMED woman anointed Jesus' HEAD at the house of Simon the Leper. The third is in Luke where the anointing was done EARLY in Jesus' ministry by a sinner when Jesus was eating dinner at Simon the Pharisee's house. She cried over Jesus' feet and wiped the tears with her hair before she anointed them with perfumed oil.

But this account in John details a public demonstration between a NAMED woman, Mary of Bethany, Jesus' long-time, close friend and he. It is unexplainable, except to say that it is her intentional show of extravagant love for him...her show of a grace upon grace kind of love, an excessive, over-the-top kind of love. It is the kind of love that had to be exhibited, not just said, the kind of love that had to be demonstrated, not just spoken. Someone said once that *"Love expressed is not sufficient; it needs to be heard to have any meaning."*⁴ (heard—tangibly realized...felt, touched, seen, tasted, smelled). Now this demonstration of Mary's wasn't lost on Judas. He objected at it being a "wasteful" act. Jesus rebuked him. He knew that Mary's tangible expression of love was the gift of all that was precious to her. He knew that Judas was soon going to sell him out for 30 pieces of silver!

Now (*pause*) Now, when WE, do as did Mary.... when WE offer extravagant love, self-less love, we need to be prepared that many of the people on the receiving end don't know what to do with it. Rev. Karoline Lewis warns us that we will be met often with resistance. People will

⁴Blair Monie

be suspicious. They will think it untrue and reject it. Certainly, Judas was just such a person.

And actually, so were the chief priests. Just think of them coming after Lazarus, because he was simply the object of Jesus' love. It's almost as though there is only so much love humans can take. People can't imagine themselves worthy of it, and they make excuses as to why they can't accept selflessly offered love, why they need to dodge it or control it.⁵ *I recall my pastor once really calling me to account when I was turning down loving kind offers from the congregation we served together when my family was in some predicament. I was saying, "Oh, no, oh no. I can't accept that. Oh, we're fine. It's not needed." He told me, "Naomi, first of all, you do need the help, and secondly, sometimes you need to let people DO for you! They're being good disciples. You need to love them enough to let them love you."*⁶ They were strange words to my ears. I wasn't raised to think that way. I believe I've passed those words of advice on to some of you. *"You need to love them enough to let them love you."*

So, while Mary shows us how to love extravagantly, Jesus teaches us, in this story, to love others by receiving their love! He received Mary's love, because he loved her as he loved all. He received her love with an intimate silence, and then, within the week went on to show his love even the more for her, for you and I and for all humanity, by giving his life on the cross. *"I asked Jesus, 'How much do you love me?' And Jesus said, 'This much.' Then He stretched out His arms and died."*⁷

And what then do you think Mary did? What did she do after she saw his very expressed tangible *love on the cross?* (pause) Well, I can't imagine that she with all the disciples didn't spend the rest of her life spreading that love everywhere they went. When extravagant love is so realized, the recipients cannot but respond in kind. They are compelled to. Remember that wonderful quote that I've given you before? : *"...The power of God's love on the cross enters the pain of the world as a contagious lure to transform it from within."*⁸ As Blair Monie says,

⁵ Karoline Lewis. "Grace Upon Grace" Day1.org/8352-karoline-lewis-grace-upon-grace-love.print (accessed 4-5-2019).

⁶ Communication. Thomas Allen. Grace Presbyterian Church-Temple, TX.

⁷ Anon.

⁸ Elizabeth A. Johnson. *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*. (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 253.

“Wherever Mary went, the fragrance was sure to go”.⁹ You see, there’s this mutuality with love...going back and forth. Jesus loved, Mary loved, Jesus received her love, Jesus loved, Mary loved. And on and on it goes. One of my favorite hymns is the second hymn we sang today. In fact, I look forward to this time of year when we can sing it. The tune is hauntingly beautiful, but the story told in its lyrics is even more so... *“My song is love unknown, my Savior’s love to me, love to the loveless shown that they might love to be.”*

I will leave you with one additional thought. It is a thought that several others have imagined as well, and I think it will give me comfort and hopefully you as well as we all head soon into Holy Week. It is a time, during which we will read once again of Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem amid crowds yelling *“Hosanna”*, all the while knowing that they would soon be yelling *“Crucify”*. It is a time that we will read of his last night with his disciples where he would give them a new commandment to love one another as he has loved them, where he announced that he would eat with them no longer, and as we relive the time of his betrayal and denial, his terrible trial, his horrible torture and mocking, his painful crucifixion and his death....It is a thought that will hopefully give us comfort during this time. And this is it: that such strong perfume rubbed into his skin would have lasted a long time. Maybe, just maybe, when he uttered those final words of *“Father, forgive them for they know not what they do”* and *“It is finished”* from the cross, he might have smelled a faint, sweet fragrance that endured. He may have had a whiff of the fragrance which reminded him that he too was greatly loved.

Amen

⁹ Blair Monie.

