

Extravagant Love

5th Sunday of Lent, Year C - John 12:1-8

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, March 17, 2013

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Okay, here we are coming at last to the end of our Lenten journey. Here we are, coming at last to what is for many of us the most important part of the Christian Year. Here we are, coming at last to the climax of the salvation story. Here we are, almost at the end of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. And once again, Jesus pauses on the way, here in the calm before the storm.

The next day, Jesus would go to Jerusalem, riding on a donkey in fulfillment of Zachariah's prophesy, and the crowd would shout "Hosanna!" and "Halleluiah!" and "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of Lord!" And the next day, the people would hail Jesus as Messiah, the Anointed One, and wonder at the authority and challenge of this teaching. And the next day, Jesus would cleanse the Temple, a sign of *God's* reign over man's laws, and the people's shouts would change form "Hosanna!" to "Crucify him!" Just the *next day*, the series of events would be set in motion which would lead him to the cross and to the grave.

But here in the calm before the storm, Jesus had paused one last time to be with his friends Lazarus, Mary, and Martha, just outside that city that kills its prophets. Lazarus, you no doubt remember, was the one Jesus had raised from the dead. And you probably remember his sister Mary, too, for listening at Jesus' feet while her sister Martha gave her such a hard time for not lending a hand with the preparations. Here in this calm before the storm, Jesus and his friends were eating their Sabbath supper. The lamps were lit. The prayers were sung. And then Mary did something scandalous, and extravagant, and wonderfully, *wonderfully* loving.

To be sure, Mary was a woman with standing in the community. Mary was a woman of wealth and status. Mary was a woman who had spent a lot of time with Jesus and his disciples. But when Mary took an alabaster vial of ointment, broke it open to pour the contents on Jesus' feet, and then wiped his feet with her hair, it was extraordinary, maybe even *shocking* to everyone in the room, because, after all, Mary was... a woman. In Mary's world – and Jesus' world, and the world of everyone mentioned in the Gospels – it was one thing to sit at the feet of the rabbi, it was a whole other thing to *touch* those feet. In Mary's world, as in parts of even our own, such an intimate act between a man and a woman was unheard of even within a family. And yet, Mary broke open a flask of perfume, poured it on Jesus' feet, leaned over him and wiped his feet – with her hair. Maybe she shouldn't have done it. Maybe she should have kept her distance and kept her place. Maybe she should have done what was expected. But there would be time enough the next day, to do what *needed* to be done. There would be time enough the next day, for the terrible price of *every* law to be paid in full. There would be time enough the next day, for *every* prophecy to be fulfilled. There would be time enough the next day, and the next, and the next, for scandalous love to allow the law and every perversion of it to spit upon mercy and nail hope to a cross. And so, here in the calm before the storm, as at his birth, another Mary said yes to another scandalous proposition, with her fragrant balm, Mary began to turn the tables, from law to love.

The treasurer in the room objected. Even if this fella *was* Judas, the one we know so well from the rest of the story, he had a point. This stuff Mary poured out, this anointing oil made from a flower that grows in the Himalayas, was very rare and *very* expensive. This stuff, so valuable it was sealed in a carved stone jar, was one of the finest, most costly things available in Mary's world. For a laborer, say a carpenter from Nazareth, three hundred denarii was the wages of a *year's* work. For Mary, this stuff may well have been everything that was personally hers. Something this valuable shouldn't be wasted, and Mary might have made *her* point by anointing her master and friend with just a little of the precious stuff. Of course, Jesus had his own point: that next week, and the week after, and the *month* after, and the *year* after... there will *always* be

those who need an open hand, there will *always* be those whose wounds need to be bound up, there will *always* be those who need mercy more than justice – and *we* are to give it to them. There would be time enough the next day, and the next, and the next, to bring near the Good News of the Kingdom of God. Here in the calm before the storm, though, if only for a few moments more, Jesus is here with those that love him. And so, as at his birth kings presented him with frankincense and myrrh, spices for his burial, Mary brought the gift set aside for his burial, and poured it *all* out, the extravagant excess running out onto the dusty floor, to prepare her Lord for his journey to the grave.

Where did Mary learn this kind of scandalous, extravagant love? Why, where she *always* was – there sitting at the feet of *Jesus*. Here he was, the King of kings, the Lord of lords, he without whom nothing seen or unseen was created – and yet Jesus had no place to lay his head. Angels proclaimed his birth, shepherds ran to see him, and wise men fell to their knees in adoration – and yet he was cradled in a manger. He turned water into wine, he stilled storms, he fed multitudes, he made the blind to see, the deaf to hear, and the lame to dance away singing – and yet here in the shadow of his Passion, he sat with a handful of friends bathed in his own burial liniments. Perhaps because she had spent all that time at Jesus' feet, genuinely *listening* to what he was saying, Mary knew that if she were going to show her love for Jesus, there *was* no next day, or a next day, or a next day. So with the vial of oil, Mary poured out her heart and her soul, to anoint the holy Anointed One of God. Here in the calm before the storm, John tells us that the whole house was *filled* with the fragrance of this singular act of love.

Outside this fragrant room, across the valley, in the close, bustling streets and at the heights of the Temple, the Passover preparations had already begun. The People of God were already beginning to gather, already bringing their sacrificial lambs to offer at the altar. The next day, Jesus would offer *himself* up to be *the* Lamb of God, sacrificed for the sins of the whole world. The next day, he would take his place among thieves and murderers. The next day, he would bear the suffering and shame of the entire human race. The next day, and the next, and the next, Jesus would pour out the only sinless life that has ever lived, to reclaim every sinner – like me... and you.

Perhaps if we still ourselves, perhaps if we return once again to sit at the feet of our Lord and Savior, perhaps, here in the calm before that storm, we can call to our own heart and soul, the fragrance of such scandalous, extravagant, wonderful love.