

Mother Lynn Finnegan
Church of the Holy Faith
Fifth Sunday in Lent
Is 43:16-21; Ps 126;
Phil 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8
April 6, 2025

Abundant Love

Jesus is saying goodbye. This dinner at the home of Lazarus is the very last stop before his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the very last stop before the crowds turn against him, the very last stop before he is arrested and crucified. Jesus is saying goodbye to good friends. He had a special relationship with these three: when Lazarus was sick, Mary and Martha sent a message to Jesus, stating, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." And when Jesus arrived, four days later with Lazarus already in the grave, Mary's tears moved him to tears as well. After miraculously raising Lazarus back to life, Jesus now returns to Bethany with a price on his head. The news of his astonishing miracle has gotten back to the Pharisees, who in their paranoia and fear plot to kill not only Jesus, but Lazarus as well. Jesus has come to say goodbye.

Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet is one of the most poignant and profuse displays of love in all of John's gospel. With the darkness of conspiracy, violence, and death hanging heavy in the air, John uses one verse to focus our attention on an act of extravagant and exuberant love: "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." Several witnesses to this demonstration of abundant love are mentioned. Martha, who, true to her own love language, quietly serves; Lazarus, whose presence is both a lingering reminder of the pain of death and Jesus' power over death, and Judas, who knows the cost of everything but the value of nothing. The anointing of Jesus by a woman is recorded in all four gospels, with varying locations, witnesses, and descriptions. The one commonality they have is that someone present ignorantly,

or arrogantly, views the act with disdain, and Jesus utterly dismisses the objection. In John's gospel, the anointing is done by Mary, Jesus' dear friend who must have been overwhelmed with joy and gratitude for her brother's miraculous new life. Only a little while ago she was uncontrollably weeping at Lazarus' tomb and today she sees him sharing a meal with the man who brought him back to life. She takes a pound, an absurd amount, of nard, a precious and costly ointment, and pours out about a year's salary onto Jesus' feet. How long has she been saving? How long has she been carefully, week by week, setting aside money, a nest egg for her unknown future, only to recklessly spend it all on this one final gift of Jesus' anointing? Mary pours it out, withholding nothing. There is so much ointment the earthy, spice-filled aroma of it seeps into every crevice of the house. In fact, there is so much ointment Mary needs to soak it up with her hair. The anointing Jesus' feet is surprising, but the intimacy of gently using her tresses to soak up the nard is scandalous. It signifies Mary's complete devotion. For Mary, the cost of the sacrifice and the inevitable criticism are irrelevant.

Mary is not simply filled with gratitude for Lazarus' resurrection, however. Her joy is mixed with melancholy and grief. Just as Mary Magdalene was the first preacher of the resurrection, Mary of Bethany is the first preacher of the crucifixion. She is a prophet. She understands this is Jesus' goodbye. "Leave her alone," Jesus says in response to Judas' protests: "She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." Judas, however, cannot comprehend Mary's actions. It is heartbreaking, really, to listen to Judas. On the surface, he seems to have a good point. He reminds Jesus of the deep biblical concern for the poor, but only as a means of manipulation. Judas is incapable of the exorbitant and unconditional love Mary exhibits, and sadly, he is incapable of understanding Jesus' exorbitant and unconditional love for him. His faithlessness is the mirror image of Mary's faithfulness. Judas will reject Jesus' love. He will reject it not because he is greedy or a thief, but because he can't see past his own utilitarian self-interest to

comprehend the value of his relationship with Jesus. Like a pound of costly nard poured out, the crucifixion will be a waste to Judas. He refuses to see the relevance of Jesus' self-emptying, saving death on the cross. The magnitude of what Judas cannot, or will not, accept is tragic for him and sobering for us.

Jesus has come to say goodbye. Mary's love will carry him forward, however, and foreshadows Jesus' greater abundant love. In a few days, he will wash his disciples' feet, wiping them gently with a servant's cloth just as Mary wiped his anointed feet with her hair. He will command his disciples to do the same, to love one another as he has loved them: a command the prophet Mary of Bethany fully understands already. He will wash the feet of Judas the backstabber, with sadness, knowing Judas rejects his love, but that he will die for him nonetheless.

Today is our last Sunday in Lent. Perhaps for you, Lent has been a season of heaviness. Perhaps it has been a season of renewal and recommitment. With this reading of Mary's poignant anointing, we stand on the cusp of our walk with Jesus through the streets of Jerusalem, an event we will celebrate next week with the waving of palms and the walk to the Plaza. We will then quickly descend into his rejection, and the darkness of Holy Week, where Mary of Bethany's prophecy of death will unfold, before Jesus' power over death is revealed.

If ever there were a time in your life to open your heart to the abundance of Jesus' love for you as Mary of Bethany did, I suggest now is it. If ever there were a time to contemplate the magnitude of Jesus' love in his dying on the cross, now is a good time. We may not have a year's salary worth of costly nard, but we have the abundance of the lives God has given us. Holy Week will begin next Sunday. Now is a good time to look at your calendars, abundant with this, that, and the other thing, and set aside an abundance of time to be with Jesus as he enters Jerusalem, as he is rejected, tormented, and dies. Because once you get the crucifixion, there's no price you can

put on it. Let Mary's exorbitant and extravagant love challenge the stinginess of our faith and encourage the generosity of our love. Amen.