

“God’s Love is Like a Fragrant Perfume”
John 12:1-8
Sunday, March 13, 2016
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

Calvin Trillin writes a true story about a man in New York City who was kidnapped. His kidnappers called his wife and asked for \$100,000 ransom. She talked them down to \$30,000.

The story has a happy ending: the man returns home unharmed, the money is recovered, and the kidnappers are caught and sent to jail. Still, I have a few questions; don’t you?

Calvin Trillin imagines out loud what the negotiations must have been like: “\$100,000 for that old guy? You have got to be crazy. Just look at him! Look at that gut! You want \$100,000 for that? You've got to be kidding. Give me a break here. \$30,000 is my top offer.”

Mark Trotter once commented that there are probably some folks who could identify with the wife in the story, but for some reason he found himself identifying with the husband. He hoped that if he were in a similar situation, there would be people who would spare no expense to get him back. They wouldn't haggle over the price. They wouldn't say, “Well, let me think about it.” He hoped they might say, “We'll do anything for you.”

This is what Mary says when she pours a jar of expensive perfume on Jesus’ feet. The cost of that perfume is 300 denarii; a year’s income for a laborer in Palestine.

“Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany.” (v. 1) So this beautiful anointing scene begins -- with a foreshadowing of the passion. Soon Jesus will go to the cross. The home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus has been the closest thing to home that Jesus has experienced during his earthly ministry, during this time when he has had “nowhere to lay his head” (Mt. 8:20; Lk. 9:58).

I. The Supper.

“There they made him a supper,” it says in verse 2. (RSV).

Present at this supper in Bethany is Martha, who makes a confession of deep and utter faith and trust in Jesus at the death of her brother, Lazarus. She says, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world” (John 11:27). Lazarus is present, too – the friend for whom Jesus wept; the friend who Jesus raised from the dead; the one who is now sitting at table with Jesus, trying to figure out what to do with the rest of his resurrection life. Mary, the “ideal disciple,” is here, too. She sat at Jesus’ feet, learning of him. Now she shares a meal with him.

Robert Fulghum writes:

“Since the beginning of time, people who trust one another, care for one another, and are deeply connected to one another have shared food as a sign of and a reaffirmation of their relationship.

“When attention is paid to this sharing, it takes on a ritual character.

“The nurturing of the body becomes a metaphor of the mutual nourishing of lives. Every time we hold hands and say a blessing.

“Before a meal, every time we lift a glass and say fine words to one another, every time we eat in peace and grace together, we have celebrated the covenants that bind us together.”

(From Beginning to End, by Robert Fulghum).

Mary, Martha, Lazarus and Jesus celebrate the covenants that bind them together when they eat dinner together in Bethany. This dinner reminds us of earlier meals in Jesus’ ministry, as he reveals the in-breaking of God’s kingdom here on earth. This dinner points to Jesus’ last supper with his disciples, preparing us for what lies ahead.

II. Mary's anointing of Jesus.

“And the fragrance filled the room.” Verse 3. (RSV).

The anointer is unnamed in Matthew and Luke. John's gospel places the anointing at the home of Jesus' three friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus. John names Mary as the anointer, she who is the “ideal disciple” sitting at Jesus' feet in Luke 10:38-42.

Matthew and Luke tell of Jesus being anointed on his head. This is a prophetic act, like the anointing of David as king while Saul is still on the throne. It is a dangerous thing, to anoint Jesus as king and Messiah while Caesar still rules the empire.

But in John's gospel, Mary anoints Jesus' feet in preparation for burial. This is a different kind of prophetic act (H. Stephen Shoemaker). She sees and accepts what Peter and the other disciples have not: the imminent death of their king, Messiah, master and friend.

“In the biography of Leonardo da Vinci, Antonio Vallenten tells of a time when the great artist was at work in Milan on his famous painting of the Last Supper. Da Vinci spent many hours meditating in the chapel of the monastery where he was working. The monks resented these ‘idle periods’ and accused the artist of wasting time. But Da Vinci defended these periods of reflection by saying, ‘When I pause the longest, I make the most telling strokes with my brush.’” (Robert A. Beringer, Turning Points).

Jesus pauses before the Passover to reflect and to spend time with his friends. These friends understand him more than his chosen disciples. Mary pauses to see, to understand and to honor the painful nature of Jesus' purpose. She also understands the purpose of Jesus' followers, better than the disciples do.

By washing Jesus' feet, Mary foreshadows his washing of the disciples' feet at the Last Supper. Mary “wipes” Jesus' feet with her hair; Jesus “wipes” the disciples' feet with a towel.

Same Greek word. Same act. A disciple's life involves washing and being washed. Once again, Mary embodies the action of the ideal disciple, this time in the washing of Jesus' feet.

III. Judas' Objection

Of course, Judas disagrees with this assessment. He criticizes Mary: "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" he demands (v. 5).

If we are honest we have to admit that Judas' question is one we often wrestle with in the Church. Do we care for the upkeep of our property – the grounds, the buildings, this beautiful sanctuary – or do we spend all that we have to serve the poor?

It's a tough question. We want to do both.

"What happened at Jesus' anointing in Bethany has plagued the followers of Jesus from then until now. How much do we spend on ourselves and how much do we give to missions? Couldn't we do more good by giving all this money to the poor instead of spending it on, say, a new building?" (Richard Meyer).

In partial response to this question, one scholar tells a story about Will Willimon, chaplain at Duke University:

"Willimon tells of the time the faculty of Duke was discussing a proposal to renovate the seminary chapel. They had received a modest proposal from the architect. But, would the chapel be renovated? No. 'With all the poverty and hunger in the world,' said one faculty member, 'how can we as Christians justify spending \$50,000 to pretty-up our chapel?' Of course, this person failed to offer similar objections when faculty salaries were raised each year, (a figure that collectively exceeds \$50,000) nor does he question the morality of the luxurious faculty lounge. Obviously the man was posturing, just as Judas was posturing. Even so, the problem is tough. How much should we give to others and how much should we reserve for

ourselves?” (Richard Meyer).

Jesus responds: “Leave her alone!” And then he adds, “You always have the poor with you...” (vv. 7-8a).

We are tempted to use this statement of Jesus as an excuse to ignore the poor and focus all our resources on worship and the beauty of this place. But Jesus does not suggest that we ignore the plight of the poor. In fact, he quotes Deuteronomy 15:11; his hearers would have known the reference: “Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.’”

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas writes, “The poor that we always have with us is Jesus. It is to the poor that all extravagance is to be given.” Jesus tells that thief, Judas, to open his own hand and give to the poor, but to leave Mary alone. Her prophetic love shown to Jesus, in preparing him for burial, is an act of worship that will continue to the end. Jesus says, “...[Mary will] keep [the perfume] for the day of my burial” (v. 7). He acknowledges her devotion, lifting her up as an example of true discipleship. She cares for the poor, as embodied in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Closing.

“...but you do not always have me” (v. 8b). Verse 8.

God’s love is like a fragrant perfume. It fills the room. God’s love shown in a supper shared with friends. God’s love shown in washing and being washed. God’s love shown in concern for the poor. God’s love shown in agony on a cross where his body is broken and his blood is poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Mary anoints Jesus’ feet with perfume and wipes them with her hair. Jesus washes the feet of his disciples and wipes them with a towel. The power of sin and death is buried in a

tomb, forgotten forever. But Jesus is raised from the dead to walk among us. The fragrance of his love wafts through the air like the freshness after a rain. Or, as one scholar puts it, “[like] the smell of freshly baked bread given to another, or a Sunday school classroom full of young children after recess, or a room prepared for a guest” (H. Stephen Shoemaker). Like a fragrant perfume.

We don’t always think of the sense of smell when we talk about spiritual things. Although candles and incense and fragrant oils have long been a part of spiritual practices.

If we pause to recall the wonderful aromas of our life, we may find ourselves filled with gratitude towards God.

May your life be filled with the fragrant perfume of God’s love for you.

Amen.