

*St. John Lutheran Church*

*The Sermon*

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April 3, 2022

John 12:1-8

Last week, I went to see my mother. She is doing pretty much the same as ever. She doesn't remember much, but she still knows me and my sisters, Becky and Liz. She is still delighted to speak with us on the phone and see us. I came up to her and took off my mask and said, "Hi Mom!" She lit up with this brilliant smile. "Oh Andy, I'm so happy to see you." We had a grand time. I told her stories about when we were children, like when we would go fishing off the coast of Mississippi and what Christmas was like in our house. We sang songs, especially Christmas carols, and "Jesus Christ is risen' today." Yea, we're getting there. Won't be long now.

At one point she said to me, "I'm cold." So, I took a lap blanket from the bed and put it on her lap. And I took her hands in between my hands. She said, "Oh, that feels so good, your hands are so warm." We sat there for a while, her hands in between mine, just being with each other.

Have you ever had a time when you felt like you were really loved, and like you were giving love? The love goes back and forth? Where you can be yourself and someone else can be themselves, and there is a richness around you. That's called intimacy, and it is full, full of the presence of God.

In the Gospel lesson for today, Mary comes to Jesus with this ridiculously expensive massage oil, scented with a plant that comes from the Himalaya Mountains in India. She pours the oil on Jesus's head, probably runs it through his hair with her fingers. She pours it on his feet, and wipes it with her hair.

The scent fills the whole house. It is outrageous. It is in your face. It is extravagant. It is sweet, and it is intimate. Mary is pouring out her love for Jesus. And in this love, she is showing what God is like.

Back at the beginning of the Gospel of John, Jesus does his first miracle, his first sign, to show us what God is like. He turns a preposterously abundant amount of water into the richest, sweetest, most potent wine, to save a wedding party.

From this we learn a couple of things about God. First, God likes a party. Second, is preposterously abundant.

Now, Mary is preposterously abundant in her expression of love. And she makes that expression, again, at a party. She is now a part of what God is like. That expression, that love is powerful.

Let me tell you the situation in the Gospel lesson for today. In the verses before our passage, Jesus has raised his friend Lazarus from the dead. This is another sign Jesus does, which shows us that God's life, God's intimacy is stronger than death. When the religious authorities of the day hear about it, they are terrified. This story was going to get around. Everyone was going to know about Jesus raising people from the dead. Everyone was going to follow him. There was going to be a rebellion. Then the Romans would come and kill everyone and destroy everything. This could not be allowed to happen. Jesus had to be got rid of.

Eventually, the chief priests also put a contract out on Lazarus, because he was walking proof that the power of God in Jesus was deeper than the power of death wielded by the Romans.

So, what do Mary and Martha and Lazarus do? Do they hide and keep a low profile? Sometimes we have to do that. Do they run away? Sometimes people do that. But is that what they do? No, it's not. What do they do? They give a party.

Why? Because God likes a party. This is the moment when Mary takes a jar of scented massage oil and anoints Jesus. This is the moment when she brings connectedness, intimacy.

In First Century Palestine, you would be anointed after your death, before they buried you. They also would anoint you when you were crowned king. Mary is doing both

these things, anointing Jesus for his burial and anointing him for his coronation at the same time.

In the verses immediately after the Gospel lesson for today, Jesus rides into Jerusalem. People proclaim him king, but they don't know he is a different kind of king, and upside down king. He is a ruler who rules by serving. He is a king who triumphs over his enemies not by killing them, but by dying for them.

This is the Jesus whom Mary loves. This is the Jesus who loves you. This is powerful.

One more note. I have to address what Jesus says to Judas, because I'm afraid that passage has been misinterpreted too often over the years. Judas objects to Mary's preposterous, ridiculous, over the top abundant expression of love, saying that the massage oil could have been sold and the money given to the poor.

This is true. It makes sense.

Jesus answers Judas by saying "You will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me."

This passage has been interpreted as saying that therefore we don't have to concern ourselves with people who are poor. We don't have to bother with the realities and injustices that bind people in poverty and drive them into desperation. We need only to praise Jesus and live moral lives. The poor are just a distraction.

This is not what Jesus means. In the first place, Jesus is quoting a passage from Deuteronomy 15, which says, basically, "you will always have the poor with you, so get used to it. You are always going to have to help the poor. This is one of the things we just do to obey God and to follow Jesus. We help people who are poor, we insist on justice and mercy in our society, so that people can escape poverty and not become poor in the first place.

Secondly, Jesus says "You will not always have me." What does that mean? Does it mean we don't have Jesus now? That there might come a time in the future when we won't have Jesus? Absolutely not. Jesus is present here with us, risen from the dead. Yes, we will always have Jesus. That's kind of the whole point.

Mary and the disciples in the Gospel lesson for today will not always have Jesus in his earthly, bodily form. That's true. Not in the form that he had then, our form. So Mary pours out her love for him in that form. We cannot anoint Jesus' head. Maybe Jesus is honoring that special moment then.

We show our love for Jesus now, in his resurrected form, by singing and teaching and learning, and by loving. We are like Mary. We become a part of God's ridiculous, preposterous, over the top abundant love for people who are poor, and for each other, whether pouring out a gift of extravagant expense, or simply holding someone's hand, God does love that party, that connection, that intimacy, that love that God brings about among you.