

The Reverend Renee L. Fenner
St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church
5th Sunday in Lent/Year C
April 7, 2019
Text: John 12:1-8

“Lavish, Extravagant Love”

“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?”

Mary may have asked herself this question over and over again. It took Judas to ask it aloud.

Mary had pulled the alabaster jar of perfume from its hiding place just recently knowing that Jesus would soon be coming to visit once again. Life was certainly different for all of them now. And somehow she knew that his visit to Bethany would be different this time, much different than any other time. It would not be like the last time she saw him when he called her brother Lazarus forth from his tomb.

As she handled the jar of expensive perfume Mary thought back to the first time they met; she, her sister Martha and Lazarus and Jesus. Was it something he did or said the first time they encountered him? Was it his demeanor, his smile, the intense look in his eyes, a stolen private moment away from his constant companions that a connection was made? How they met didn't matter now. What she did know was theirs was a friendship not to be broken. Jesus was coming to visit and they would celebrate. And who can blame them? It isn't every day that a dead man comes back to life!

Jesus is now at the point of no turning back as he draws nearer to Jerusalem. His time, his hour, has finally come. He knows full well that it is the last journey he will ever take. He is a marked man, listed high on the religious leaders' most wanted list. With Bethany only two miles outside of the city, what better place to take refuge with his dearest friends last time before continuing on his journey.

And so the party began.

Martha was her usual self, busy tending to the needs of guests and preparing the meal. Lazarus, fully alive, was conversing at table. The sounds of laughter, stories, and news; the smells of stews, fish, and baking bread all filling the house.

Quietly, Mary slips away to another room and takes the container of precious perfume into her hands. We can only imagine the angst and the dialogue swirling around in her head.

What she holds is expensive perfume. This is not something she got from Wally World or J.C. Penny's. This was not a purchase from a mall's perfume kiosk or knock off store. This was the good stuff! Imported nard worth an entire year's wages. Worth 300 pieces of silver. A pound of that costly perfume would be worth ten to twenty thousand dollars in today's money! You can do a lot with that kind of money!

Yes, she knew the teachings she had heard ever since she was a little girl. She knew what was expected of her and every Jewish person who adhered to the Law of Moses. They were to take care of the poor, the widowed, and the orphaned. Had she even considered selling an ounce of it or less so that others in her village might eat or have a new shoes or even new clothes? As much as she sat at Jesus' feet, hadn't he ever spoken to her of caring for those in need? But in her mind the perfume was for *him*, Jesus, who loved her and loved Martha and loved her brother Lazarus enough to raise him from the very bowels of death. If anyone knew Jesus, really knew Jesus and what he was about, it would be she.

Without a word, Mary silently approaches Jesus and takes down her hair. She slips off his sandals and takes his feet-feet that are dusty and dirty and calloused from walking miles on end and lavishly pours the perfumed oil upon them. Mary takes them into her hands and massages his tired feet with the oil without abandon. She is doing things that are not acceptable in polite company. A woman in her time does not unbind and loosen her hair for anyone except for her husband. And yes, the feet of one's guest after a long journey would have been washed by a woman or a slave, yet only the feet of a dead person were anointed by another. And she dares to touch a man who is not her husband in this loving manner and wipes his feet, not with a towel, but with her hair!

Mary, it seems, shows no inhibition whatsoever. And Jesus does absolutely nothing to stop her as she continues to caress his feet, the precious oil spilling out from between his toes and her now dripping hair and onto the floor. The odor of perfume wafting heavily in the room. Talk about a steamy scene! Wow! This is beyond what is decent expected behavior. This is intimate. This is lavish. This is extravagant. This is love beyond measure.

To anyone else it was an impractical and wasteful act. *“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?”* Judas grouses.

Perhaps so. But just as Jesus has his eyes fixed on Jerusalem, Mary has had her mind, heart, her entire being fixed on the One who has given life and transformed lives and is about to make all things new. She has given the most precious gift she owned to Jesus. This was her gift to the One who would soon gift his very life for the sake of the world.

Maybe Mary sensed Jesus’ impending death—Jesus certainly says so. *“Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.”*

It would be several days later that Jesus would extend a similar gesture to his friends as they gathered at what would be their last supper. In John’s Gospel, Jesus did get up from the table and fashion an apron around his waist and quietly approached each of the twelve without hesitation, even Judas, the one who betrayed him, and Simon Peter who would later deny him. Jesus would wash and dry each one’s feet. And he would ask them to do as he did, as Mary did; to pour out acts of extravagant love to others. *“Love one another,”* Jesus said, *“Love one another as I have loved you.”*

And what does this love look like?

It will look and feel differently in every context and in every situation and with any person. Sometimes it will be generous, impractical and exorbitant. Self-less. Lavish. Messy. It will be like that “pound of costly perfume made of pure nard” spilled out onto the floor. It will be like a heavenly banquet meant to be remembered and shared. And it will cost as Jesus knew well.

But for today, he pauses and celebrates with his friends and disciples though they seem oblivious to those things Jesus had told them earlier. For the events will take place in just a few short days.

Next week we will turn and walk at Jesus' side and begin the trek through Holy Week. Let us resolve to walk with him as he walked for us toward Jerusalem and the cross.

Amen.