

We're down to two Sundays for our Lenten Sermon Series: Meeting Jesus At The Table. Today is Palm Sunday, the beginning of the holiest week of the Christian year. Today's Gospel story is a little odd for Palm Sunday, as it doesn't actually cover the typical Palm Sunday Gospel story where Jesus is paraded down the streets of Jerusalem on a donkey and people throw down their coats on the road and wave their palm branches, shouting "Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" Today's Gospel story takes place the night BEFORE Jesus rode on the donkey, and it mimics one we had a few weeks ago. As I said then, all four Gospels offer a story of Jesus being anointed with perfume by a woman. As it is with any story told in different versions, we often get the details of each mixed up and combine them into one story. However, each account has distinctive features and should be examined on its own terms. Remember that in Luke, unlike in the other three gospels, the story takes place at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Only in John's Gospel is the woman identified by name: Mary. A signature of John's Gospel is the importance of symbolism and signs, which is all the more reason to look at what comes right before today's story. Lazarus' death and resurrection. Jesus tells those gathered at the home of Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:25-26). Then Jesus weeps and goes on to Lazarus' tomb. Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. This is both a good and a bad thing- good, in that this sign, this miracle, draws lots of people to follow and to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, the anointed One. This is a bad thing because this sign, this miracle, also draws people who want Jesus out of the picture. Word gets back to some of the chief priests and Pharisees about what has happened and they call a council meeting.

Some worry that if they let Jesus “go on something like this, everyone will believe in him and that the Romans will come and take away both their temple and their people” (11:48). Thus, the plot to kill Jesus thickens and the timeline until his death moves up. The chief priests and Pharisees put out an APB on Jesus so that they could arrest him. Meanwhile, Jesus travels a few miles away with his disciples, as it was almost time for the Jewish Passover. He goes back to the home of his dear friends Lazarus, Martha and Mary to share a meal together (John 11). Make no mistake. The placement of today’s story on the heels of Lazarus’ resurrection, sets the table for what is to take place in the next several days. Let us pray before reading the word of God. PRAY. READ **John 12:1-8** (CEB).

Jesus and his disciples are guests- once again- at the home of Lazarus and his sisters. This time Lazarus is back from the dead- having been resurrected by Jesus- and he’s sitting at table with them. At some point during the meal, Mary took “an extraordinary amount, almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of a pound, of very expensive perfume made of pure nard, and she anointed Jesus’ feet with it. Then she wiped his feet dry with her hair. The house was filled with the aroma of perfume” (12:3). A few things to note about this scene. Jesus, who had no place to truly lay his head during his years of ministry, was probably in one of the few places that felt like home to him, as he loved Lazarus, Martha and Mary. Where would you want to be if you knew you would die soon? He was sharing table fellowship in a place of comfort. I wonder if you could hear a pin drop after Mary anointed Jesus’ feet and then wiped them dry with her hair. Yes, it was a common practice of hospitality to have your feet washed by a servant, but this act was abnormal and a bit provocative. Back then- a woman with her hair down was only seen by her husband or parents,

as it was an intimate, sensual act for a woman to let down her hair. Can't you just hear the rumors? Some of us may get caught in the story here. But what about the other details like the extravagant love poured out...or the cost and amount of perfume used...or the perfume aroma that filled not just a room but the entire house (a house that just several days ago filled with the smells of decay and mourning)? Judas picks up on the scent, as well as on a few of these details as he protests Mary's act of devotion and love. This strong scent brings up some strong emotions in Judas in John's version of the story. He complains saying, "This perfume was worth a year's wages! Why wasn't it sold and the money given to the poor" (12:5)? These are Judas' only words in John's Gospel, and they are "undercut by asides from the narrator, both before and after he speaks, identifying him as the Lord's betrayer, and as one who cares nothing for the poor- in fact, he's a thief" (*Encounters With Jesus*, Frances Taylor Gench, p. 95). However, some of us may find Judas' protest here appropriate. I must confess that Judas does have a point, and his criticism gives me pause. I've grown up in "the land of the pious and prudent- of being good stewards- of all things done in moderation- of carefully weighing the options and considering the costs (The *Presbyterian Outlook*, Jill Duffield). Asking questions such as, "Could not a more worthy cause be found in which to use the funds expended on a fleeting display of devotion" (Frances Taylor Gench, p. 95)?

Where have you seen extravagance and judged it as wasteful- especially extravagant things that don't last? Or when have you been made to feel uneasy or uncomfortable by someone's extravagance? I wonder if that's not what some of the other male disciples may have been feeling yet Judas is the only one that

we know to give voice to it. But Jesus defends Mary in the face of Judas' protest. "Leave her alone," Jesus says. He continues, "This perfume was to be used in preparation for my burial, and this is how she has used it. You will always have the poor among you, but you won't always have me" (12:7-8). What did Jesus mean by this? This is the first mention of his burial in the Gospel of John, a sign of his impending death. Jesus' days among his beloved disciples are numbered and Mary seems to be the only one in the room to recognize Jesus' limited time with them on earth. Mary also may be showing her gratitude to Jesus' for raising Lazarus from the dead. Maybe the perfume celebrates the gift of life in contrast to- and in defiance of- death (Robert Williamson)? Anointing was a common practice for burial. It was also a common practice to anoint kings, consecrating them for a specific purpose. But kings were anointed on their heads, not their feet. Which could only mean one thing. The only man who got his feet anointed was a dead man, and Jesus knew it. And what about the always having the poor part? What does that mean? Some people over the years have misunderstood Jesus' response to Judas and the others. Jesus wasn't saying not to serve the poor. No. "Jesus, like his fellow Jews, would of course have expected people to help support the poor. But in this case, there is the need- in this moment- to support him" (*Entering The Passion of Jesus*, AJ Levine, p. 102). Here Jesus seems to be quoting from Deuteronomy 15:11, which states that there will never cease to be some in need on the earth. But for this moment...for now...Mary in her extravagant act is caring for Jesus in his time of need. She responds to the call of love in the moment. In the now. Mary acts. She doesn't wait until tomorrow. She gets it and acts immediately. Sometimes we miss the moment- the now- when we're caught up in calculating the costs and being prudent. And sometimes "we

give our resources, in generosity, even if they may seem wasteful” (AJ Levine, p. 102). Can you think of times when gifts of extravagance that don’t last are selfless acts for what was happening then at that moment? What about sending flowers to someone in the hospital or to a grieving family who has experienced the death of a loved one? That could be seen as a waste, as the flowers are going to die and there are poor people who could have used that money. “But at that time, in that moment and in that place, the flowers can brighten the spirit of the one who is suffering” (AJ Levine, p. 102).

Mary risks and performs a prophetic act- an act of a disciple- an act that Jesus will soon give to his disciples in the washing of their feet at the last supper. “What Mary has done for Jesus, and he for his disciples, Jesus will instruct them to do for one another” (Frances Taylor Gench, p. 96). We forget that Jesus is fully human, just as he is fully divine. At the table with his closest friends, he could simply be human, if but for a moment. He knew his days were numbered. He knew that raising Lazarus from the grave put a target on his back/a price on his head and that he was marching to his grave. So, for a moment, before returning to his painful journey, he could- for once- be ministered to instead of ministering to others. I wonder how Jesus felt when Mary anointed him with that expensive perfume? I imagine he felt extremely loved, but we aren’t told. I also imagine he needed to feel that extravagant love in order to endure what was coming- but we aren’t told that either. Who knows? Regardless, the fragrance of the ointment would forever be a reminder of Mary’s love for Jesus. Wherever she walked, when people saw Mary, they caught a fragrance and they thought of Jesus. Such a strong perfume would have lasted a long time. Which makes me wonder if Jesus

took Mary's love with him the very next day as he rode the donkey down the streets that paved the way to his death? I wonder if the scent still lingered as he washed the disciples' feet later that week and gave them a new commandment- to love one another as he loves them. I wonder...if there wasn't but a faint, lingering smell of perfume on Jesus' body- reminding him of Mary's love- as he was beaten and then hung on a cross to die. All we are told here is that Jesus blesses Mary's act and rebukes Judas' criticism of her act. Mary recognizes the rarity of the moment, and she seizes it. She recognizes that there is nothing frugal about God's love. So she empties herself for the One who emptied himself- even to death on a cross. We're told that wherever the Gospel is preached around the world, Mary will always be remembered. Without using words, Mary leaves nothing unsaid in the face of Jesus' impending death.

Mary spills her bottle of perfume with wild abandon for no other reason than this: Jesus is there, and he is the Messiah- the one who saves. Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal priest and writer puts it this way: "In Jesus, the extravagance of God's love is made flesh. In him, the excessiveness of God's mercy is made manifest. This bottle will not be held back to be kept and admired. This precious substance will not be saved. It will be opened, and used, at a great price. It will be raised up and poured out for the life of the world, emptied to the last drop" ("The Prophet Mary" sermon). Jesus, our Lord and Savior, meets us at the table- time and time again. The question is can you- can I- risk such extravagant hospitality and discipleship? What are you holding back from Jesus and why are you keeping it in reserve? Right here in the deeply misogynistic world of 1st century Palestine, the one truly faithful disciple turns out to be...a woman. All the guys are there- the

fisherman, the brothers, the tax collector, the soon-to-be betrayer, the soon-to-be denier, the one who sat under a fig tree- living the daily ins and outs of life with Jesus for three years and somehow, they missed it. They missed the point of it all. But Mary? Mary gets it. She had been paying attention. She knew how to respond to Jesus without being told. She acted out Jesus' last, new commandment before he ever said it. Prophets do things like that, you know. They act out. "They act out the truth that no one else can see, and those standing around either write them off as nuts or fall silent before the disturbing news they bring from God" (Taylor, "The Prophet Mary" sermon, 3.21.10). Are we paying attention and willing to act out extravagantly in order to serve and follow Jesus, even to the cross? Amen.