**The Fragrance of Love**

John 12:1-8

Lent 5; April 7, 2019

**Text**

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 3 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. 4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5 "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" 6 (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) 7 Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8 You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

**Reflection**

Our Lenten journey is moving towards its end. Only twelve days are left until Good Friday. While our Lenten journey is on its way towards the cross, the life of Jesus is also headed on its way towards his crucifixion. His days are numbered and he knows this. The shadow of death hangs over his journey. A few days ago, when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, Jesus made it to the top of the religious authorities’ “most wanted” list. The Roman colonial authorities and chief priests are determined that Jesus must be killed (11:53). In spite of this horrible situation and facing his impending death, Jesus does not turn away from his journey to Jerusalem.

One day before he enters Jerusalem, Jesus stops in to see his old friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus at their home on the outskirts of Bethany. They are a family dear to his heart, two sisters and a brother who seem to think of him too as a brother. Jesus loves them, although today’s scripture writer John does not tell us why this visit is made. Maybe there is never a “why” to love.

This family also knows of the impending death of Jesus. They feel sorry for Jesus, because, through his raising of Lazarus he has made himself more vulnerable. The religious authorities in Jerusalem fear that in Jesus, God’s power for life is stronger than death. Therefore they decide to get rid of him. The family smells a stench from the religious authorities. It is a stench designed to deny life and to announce that the power of death has won. It is a stench that declares that death is the only end of the story.

While the shadow of death hangs over Jesus, his friends take him in and care for him, shutting out the world for the one night at least. They hold a dinner party with Jesus and his disciples to celebrate the new life of Lazarus. After four days in the tomb the air has been filled with the stench of death, but now there is no more, because Jesus has conquered death.

Martha serves the food, and it is not difficult to imagine the conversation as dishes are passed around the table: “Do you remember how Lazarus looked when he came out of the tomb? “Do you believe that Jesus just said, ‘Come out’ – and there Lazarus was?” “But what will happen next? You know, the authorities want to arrest him.” “Are you afraid?”

And then, conversation stops for a moment. All eyes turn to Mary for she takes a pound of the most expensive perfume, pours it over Jesus’ feet, and then wipes them with her hair. To understand Mary’s anointing act, we must first understand how strong perfume is when made of pure nard. Let us imagine that Mary poured out sixteen ounces or 500 ml, not just a few drops. We can easily imagine that the whole house is filled with the perfume. Why does she pour the perfume? What is the meaning?

While we are reflecting on John’s story about anointing Jesus, it is worth noticing Matthew (26:6-13) and Mark (14:3-9) also report a similar story. The stories from Matthew and Mark are different from John in that the woman is not named and she anoints Jesus’ head, not feet.

In the Jewish tradition there are two occasions for the use of anointing oil: anointing the head on proclaiming the King and anointing a dead person for the funeral. According to Matthew and Mark, the unnamed woman anoints Jesus’ head in a way of expressing her faith: Jesus is Lord (king) and the lords of this world are not. For her Jesus is Lord and all the would-be lords of our lives are not.

In today’s scripture according to John on what part of his body does Mary anoint Jesus? Mary does not anoint his head, but his feet. What does this mean? Mary uses the perfume as for a funeral. Jesus is still alive, but she is preparing him for his death. Mary is anointing Jesus for his burial.

Her behaviour must seem strange to the disciples. Yet, of all the disciples, it is Judas who puts a question. “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” Judas has a point because it is so expensive. The price is one year’s wages. It may feed a family for a year. But Mary thinks differently. There will be nothing prudent or economical about the death of Jesus, just as there has been nothing prudent or economical about Jesus’ life. Mary sees in Jesus the extravagance of God’s love made flesh. In Jesus, the excessiveness of God’s compassion is made manifest. Mary sees the grace and acts on her faith.

When Mary anoints Jesus’ feet, does she think only of Jesus’ death? I don’t think so. She sees the hope of life beyond death. She strongly protests the power of death held by the Roman colonial power and religious authorities. You may ask how we can know this. I invite you to read the story of Jesus raising Lazarus to life, found in John, chapter 11. When Jesus takes away the stone of Lazarus’ tomb, Martha says to Jesus, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days” (11:39). The tomb is filled with the stench. The stench means death.

In this context, the meaning of perfume is the opposite to that of death. It is the symbol of life; the stench of death cannot overwhelm the power of life. In the joyful time of Lazarus’ rising from death and the sad time of Jesus’ facing death, Mary pours out the perfume for both. She believes in life beyond death. She believes that even though Jesus will be killed, he will be with us in a different way. She believes that the authorities cannot get rid of Jesus permanently, so her anointing of Jesus’ feet is an act of faith.

Mary continues to think about Jesus after his death, but believes Jesus is always with her and with others. Mary is anointing and wiping Jesus’ feet with the mixed feelings of sadness and joy. Five days later the gospel writer uses the same word ascribed to Mary in today’s scripture - “wipe” - in the story of him washing the feet of the disciples (13:5). Jesus asks them to love one another as he has loved them. What Jesus will do for his disciples and will ask them to do for one another, Mary already does for him here. Mary practises her love for Jesus by wiping his feet.

The stench of death is coming ever closer to Jesus, but Mary’s fragrance of love is stronger than that stench. The fragrance of love overwhelms violence and death with love and faithful action. The love that fills the house is spreading throughout the world today to overcome the stench of death from poverty, hunger, violence, war, abuse or religious-motivated crime. The stench of death cannot overwhelm when we practise Mary’s and our faith and love. Rather, the world will be filled with the fragrance of love’s perfume. The gospel writer records Jesus’ words: “*Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her*” (Mark 14:9). So be it.

**Quiet Reflection for during the Service &**

**Group Discussion for Lenten Companionship**

In the impending death of Jesus, Mary expresses her faith that love is stronger than death and sees new life after death. What is implication of her faith on my faith journey? What concept of Easter in Mary’s action can we glimpse?

In a patriarchal society such as Jesus’, anointed woman’s stories (unnamed woman in Matthew and Mark, and Mary in John) survived in the Bible. What other stories nameless or named women’s faithful action do you remember in the Bible? How do we remember “her” on our faith journey?

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