

“An Act of Love”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Fifth Sunday of Lent – April 7, 2019

John 12: 1-8

Debbie and I had the joy of hearing Heather play with the New World Youth Symphony Orchestra last weekend at Carnegie Hall in New York City. They did an outstanding job, and it was a real treat to be able to hear them at that famous concert hall with other members of our family present. It was especially meaningful to me because I got to do the same thing with my high school band in 1988. And yes, the old axiom is true: How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice, practice, practice!

During our days in New York City, I was struck by not only the sights and sounds we encountered, but also the aromas and smells of that great city. We walked into a French bakery, and the aroma of freshly-baked croissants tickled my taste buds. We bounded down the steps to the subway, and the foul, musty odor of who-knows-what made it hard to breathe. As we hustled down 34th Street to catch our train back to Princeton, New Jersey, we passed by a street vendor selling incense, and that particular aroma gave me flashbacks to walking in the crowded streets of Ahmedabad, India, nine years ago. What we smell can be as powerful, if not more powerful, than what our eyes see or our ears hear, as we experience various places in this world.

The power of aroma can be an invitation to new possibilities, too. “Anne Smith, who began Charlotte Food Rescue (in Charlotte, North Carolina), was hauling a station wagon full of donuts to a food shelter. She stopped to make a pitch to executives of what is now Bank of America. As she rode the elevator to the top floor, someone said, ‘You smell like donuts!’ She laughed and told why, and by the time the elevator door opened, she had recruited another (supporter)” (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 143). God can use a multitude of senses to achieve wonderful things.

In this poignant story from the Gospel of John, we are surrounded by the aroma of God’s grace and extravagance. For as Jesus makes one final stop on his way to Jerusalem, he is anointed not as a king who will conquer the world, but as a savior who will save the world.

This story is not unique to John’s Gospel; in fact, it appears in all four of the gospel accounts. But John is unique in that the characters which are a part of the story are very familiar to us: Mary, Martha and Lazarus. In the chapter immediately before this we read of Jesus’ travel to Bethany, Mary and Martha’s plea to him for their brother who has died, and Jesus bringing Lazarus back to life. In fact, at the beginning of chapter 11, there is a literary foreshadowing of the story we have read

today: "Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair" (11:1-2).

Barbara Brown Taylor shares about the personal relationship Jesus shared with this family in Bethany. *The day before he entered Jerusalem for the last time, Jesus stopped in to see his old friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in the suburb of Bethany. They were a family dear to his heart, two sisters and a brother who seemed to think of him as a brother, too. He loved them, John tells us, although he does not tell us why. Maybe there is never a "why" to love. They called him Lord, so they knew who he was, and yet they were not his disciples, or at least not in the formal sense. They were his friends, the three people in whose presence he could be a man as well as a messiah.*

Just a short time ago Jesus had worked a miracle at their house. "Lord, he whom you love is ill," the sisters had written him, and he had crossed the Jordan to come to them, knowing full well it was too late. Then, after Jesus the man had wept in front of his friend's tomb, Jesus the messiah shouted him out of it and restored Lazarus to life.

Now he has returned to them with the chief priests hot on his trail . . . By raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus has made it to the top of the religious right's "most wanted" list. His days are numbered and he knows it. When he arrives at his friends' house in Bethany with his disciples, they can see it on his face (Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Prophet Mary," Bread of Angels, 57-58).

Imagine the thoughts of Jesus at that moment. It was six days before the Passover; it was a day before he would enter Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He hadn't shied away from his final destination and fate, and knew the end was in sight. Those who followed him – his disciples and friends – probably didn't fully realize the significance of the moment. And now he had come to someplace familiar, with familiar people, to share a night's fellowship and food, and to get away from the threats and dangers which surrounded him for just one evening.

At table with him was the man for whom he wept, Lazarus, and in a very real way, has traded his own life for his friend's. Can you imagine that scene? Normally, a dinner after a funeral is a time of reminiscing and sharing stories about the person who has died. But at this dinner, they are eating with the man who has died! Lazarus is the proof of God's amazing love to this family, and of their deep devotion and love to their Lord.

And so, it is in this setting and under these circumstances that the anointing of Jesus takes place in John's Gospel. Taylor continues with her description of the scene: *No one notices that Mary has gone again until she comes back, holding a slender clay jar in her hands. Without a word she kneels at Jesus' feet and breaks the neck of the jar, so that the smell of spikenard fills the room – a sharp scent somewhere between*

mint and ginseng. As everyone in the room watches her, she does four remarkable things in a row.

First she loosens her hair in a room full of men, which a respectable woman never does. Then she pours balm on Jesus' feet, which also is not done. The head, maybe, but not the feet. Then she touches him, a single woman caressing the feet of a rabbi – also not done, not even among friends – and then she wipes the salve off again with her hair. It is totally inexplicable, the bizarre end to an all around bizarre act . . .

Only in John's account does the woman have a name – Mary – and a relationship with Jesus. She is not a stranger, not a sinner, but a longtime friend – which makes her act all the more peculiar. He knows she loves him. He loves her too. So why this public demonstration, this odd pantomime in front of all their friends? It is extravagant. It is excessive. She has gone overboard, as Judas is quick to note (Taylor, 58-59).

It is ironic that it is Judas, the one who will betray Jesus, who raises the question which is probably on all of our minds: wasn't this act a waste of good money? The value of the ointment was 300 denarii, or about a year's salary in those days. That money could have easily been used to buy food or clothing or common needs for the poor. I certainly thought of that when Jesus lets Mary do this extravagant act: "Is this necessary? Isn't it a waste of precious resources?"

William Carter writes: *Curiously, Jesus does not take issue with the temporary nature of this gift. He declares it is appropriate in that moment, particularly in light of his impending death. He is gracious enough to receive it with gratitude.*

As John states, Jesus is the one through whom everything was made. There is abundance wherever he is present. As Mary generously anoints him, he tells her critics to "leave her alone." Generosity breeds generosity. Judas can criticize Mary for what she had done, but the story parenthetically exposes his hypocrisy. Either we love generously, or we do not. Either we are already engaged in providing for the poor, or we are secretly hoarding what might otherwise be shared.

Jesus is the gift of God. According to John's Gospel, Jesus is sent into a world that did not request him, yet he acts entirely for its benefit. He consistently acts on his own terms, always revealing the grace and truth of God. Lazarus was raised from the dead on Jesus' timetable, and not in response to his sisters' wishes. Similarly, Jesus will lay down his life for his people (John 10:17-18), not because he is asked to do so, but because he chooses to give himself (Feasting on the Word, 142-144).

How do we view the gifts of life we have been given? What do we view as being a gift to us? Let's say we are blessed with a gift – music, leadership, teaching, listening, art – it can be anything. Do we view that as a gift from God, or do we view it as a burden, or perhaps not something very special? Are we giving thanks to God for that gift through the ways we nurture, share, and express that gift to others? Or

are we hoarding it by refusing to cultivate it, share it, or honor it for what it is: a gift from God?

One of the things that brings me the most joy is when I see someone genuinely sharing the gift or gifts God has given. It's like an aroma of perfume that fills the room with hope, joy, and love. Their generosity breeds generosity. It is a holy time and moment.

Conversely, it tears my soul apart to see someone refusing to share their God-given gift with the world. Or they take that gift for granted to such a degree that they stop honing and crafting it, and it withers on the vine. They start questioning others' giftedness, which in reality is rooted in their own inability to smell God's bountiful grace all around them.

How might we see our gifts the way God sees them – as treasures of a generous God which allow the love of Christ to anoint all who are called children of God?

Mary's act was an act of love. The ointment which she used, though it was full of material wealth, was not nearly enough to adequately anoint the one who would die for the sins of the world. But for this one moment in time, Jesus reminds us of the lavish gift which God has blessed us with in his grace, and it is that lavish gift which enables us to serve the poor and others as the church. For in Jesus, the extravagance of God's love is made flesh. In him, the excessiveness of God's mercy is made manifest (Taylor 61).

So be thankful for a God who sends messengers to us to show us those moments which are significant and special. That is what Mary did to Jesus, an act of love which shows the abundant love we are blessed with on the cross.

Thanks be to God. Amen.