

“Anointed”

April 7, 2019

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Isaiah 58:6-12

John 12:1-8

A smell can awaken the senses. The smell of rain. The smell of a puppy’s breath (or the less pleasant smell of my geriatric dog’s breath). The smell of the New York City streets when in the summer when businesses have put the garbage out. The smell of coffee brewing in the morning. The smell of kimchi. The smell of your loved one’s gym clothes after working out. The smell of your first car. The smell of our sanctuary. The smell of homelessness. Even danger has a smell-- when I am about to fall or have an accident, I can smell it in my nose. I heard someone suggest that the smell of a baby’s head is so powerful because the baby has most recently been with God. Maybe that is why the smell of death is so powerful too: the person is returning to God.

Come with me to the house in Bethany, and allow the perfume that has just filled the room also fill our senses. They had just had dinner and were still lounging at the table, jars of wine still on the tabletop. Do you see Mary, crouched down, rubbing the ointment onto his feet, wiping it with her hair, making sure she gets between each toe, each crack of his calloused skin?

What do you sense? Do you sense beauty? Do you feel discomfort? Or are you just watching, a bystander in the room, wondering what all this means, wondering what happens next? Are you okay in the moment, or are you looking nervously around, thinking who will *do* something about this, who will make it stop?

All four gospels tell some version of this story. In Matthew, Mark and Luke it is an unnamed woman. Luke does not name her as Mary, of the Mary, Martha and Lazarus family, whom Jesus loved, but instead names her as a “sinful woman,” who washes Jesus’ feet with her tears along with her hair; over the years Christians have enthusiastically read as a prostitute. We are so uncomfortable with our bodies, and with touching, that we can only imagine it would be a prostitute who would touch a man that way.

But in John, she is Jesus’ dear friend, whom he loves, in a family with a brother and a sister whom John also describes as Jesus’ loved ones. Regardless, Judas is the one

who finally speaks up in opposition, although he may not have been the only uncomfortable one in the room. “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” Judas asked.

Judas asked the question, but others of you in the room may have also been wondering it. In their journeys, had they not seen human suffering at every turn? The hungry poor. Widows and orphans. Those with ailments and injuries that kept them outside the circle of community to the point that they had to beg to live? A slideshow of faces, lives that could be changed with that kind of money, may have flashed through the other disciples’ heads. “Is this not the fast I choose,” asks Isaiah the prophet, “to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly.”

John’s gospel tattles on Judas as asking the question because really he kept the common purse and wanted to steal the money... but his was still a good question!

Jesus’ reply, “You will always have the poor among you, but you do not always have me,” may seem strange coming from someone who was such a defender of the poor. Over the centuries, many leaders have used this same phrase to justify poverty as a matter of fact, something we can just take for granted rather than have a moral responsibility to eliminate it.

Yet, you should know that Jesus was actually quoting from Deuteronomy 15:11: “*Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth*, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land.’ It is an ongoing responsibility of God’s people to have a care for and accountability to the poor and needy, whom we will always have among us as long as human greed and sin allows for such poverty to exist in a world where there are enough resources for all if properly shared.

You will have the poor with you always, but you will not always have me. Mary knew something about losing someone she loved. Just in the chapter before today’s reading, John tells of Lazarus, whom scriptures describe as “the one Jesus loved.” Lazarus had fallen ill, and when word got out to Jesus, he stayed where he was and did not begin the journey to Bethany, where Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha lived, for another 2 days. By the time Jesus gets to Bethany, Lazarus had already died. Mary, his sister, told him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn’t have died!” He asks that they

roll the stone from the tomb. Lazarus' other sister Mary protests, "The smell will be awful! He's been dead four days!" It seems that Jesus doesn't enter the tomb, but calls into it with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" Lazarus appeared, still wrapped in the coverings of his death, but very much alive. "Unbind him, and let him go!" Jesus commanded.

So in our story this morning, the family of Lazarus, unbound by death, hosts Jesus and his disciples for dinner, just 6 days before the Passover. The text does not make it clear how much time has passed since Lazarus' resurrection, but we know that the coming Passover meal will be Jesus' last; in a matter of days, he will head to the cross.

In Jesus' time, perfume was used to mask the scent of death. It was a warm environment, and they did not have funeral homes or embalming to preserve the body. Jesus said that Mary had purchased this perfume to use in for Jesus' death. Robert Williamson, who is both a Hebrew Bible scholar and pastor of a church made up completely of homeless people comments, "Her gratitude has compelled her to use the perfume in celebration of Jesus and the *life* he restored rather than as a ritual associated with death and burial observance. The perfume celebrates life in contrast to—and in defiance of—death.¹"

What Mary offers is a mindful presence, because as a sister to Lazarus she knows that death can come at any time. After my mom died of a heart attack while she was visiting me years ago, each moment we shared leading up to that time became sacred to me, and seared into my memory: the look of pure joy on Mom's face when Kai, just one year old, would laugh and smile at the songs my mother sang to her; our shopping expedition when my mom, with enthusiastic approval, watched me try on and choose between two dresses-- she loved them both, but I only bought one. Now they both hang in my closet-- in the days after her death I walked weeping through the mall and purchased that second dress she had encouraged me, but I had been too sensible, to buy. I remember the lunch we shared a lunch at the top of the John Hancock building. We could see all of Chicago and gleaming Lake Michigan from our skyscraper window views. It was the day she died; it was our Last Supper.

Losing Lazarus, even for four days, made Mary recognize how precious *life* is, and she was sure to value and treasure Jesus' life while he was still with her.

¹ Robert Williamson, The Politics of Extravagance: John 8:1-12 in Political Theology Network blog March 7, 2019

We call the Passover supper Jesus shared with his disciples right before his betrayal and death The Last Supper. This meal at Bethany was 6 days between that one, and Amy Jill Levine calls it The First Supper. As this version of the story appears in Matthew, Jesus tells those gathered, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

“Do this in remembrance of me.” We say it every time we take communion. Mary, in her act anointing, taught Jesus something about sharing his body, just as the teenaged Mary, who years before had told an angel, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” nine months later had her body stretched and torn as she pushed God into the world. She showed God what it means to say yes to the joy and pain of offering yourself: this is my body, broken for you.

There is a certain grace in the giving and receiving of another’s body: whether in sex, or in caring for a baby, in nursing, or serving the bodily needs of the homeless, or in washing the body of a geriatric parent. If we are present, we are mindful of the beauty and the flaws, the humble and the glorious, the shameful and the wonderful, the human and the divine aspects of the one we are touching. As for Jesus, although this was not necessarily a sexual act, it involved an exchange of dirt for ointment, of the lowest part of the body with the highest part of the body.

What Mary shows us is that our bodies are vehicles for salvation. Salvation comes from the root word salve, a healing balm or ointment. Mary, with her hands, her sweat, her tears, and her hands, anointed Jesus with the ritual instrument of perfumed ointment, and in doing so prepared Jesus himself to become the healing ointment, the salve, the salvation for others.

We are each, as the Psalmist describes, fearfully and wonderfully made. Could it be that our bodies are also capable of receiving and offering the grace of Jesus Christ, of being transformed by it? Can our bodies be the site for God’s salvation, not in the future when we die, but today? May it be so! Amen.