

“Faith Made New”
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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Isaiah 43:16-21
John 12:1-8

Finally, finally, we are seeing the flowering beauty as trees in New Jersey testify to the workings of spring. It won't last long: the flowers will release their pollen to bees and birds and butterflies, and then their work will be done; their petals will fall to the ground as deeper green leaves clothe the trees and shade the sun.

When I was a child, I was told that the dogwood always blooms around Easter because the flower, with 4 petals, is in the shape of the cross, the berries in the middle a crown of thorns, and the crimson-marked edges of the petals a sign of Jesus' scars. That was when I lived down south; here in NJ we have a dogwood in our yard, and I expect it won't bloom until late April, early May— so I will just let it be a flower for flowering sake.

What are your favorite flowering trees?

Japanese American artist Makoto Fujimura gives a beautiful reflection on the sacred role of beauty, and of the holy gift of mercy. He sees both in Mary's anointing of Jesus. He explains, “Beauty, to the Japanese of old, held together the ephemeral (meaning short-lasting) with the sacred. Cherry blossoms are most beautiful as they fall, and that experience of appreciation leads the Japanese to consider their mortality. *Hakanai bi* (ephemeral beauty) denotes sadness, and yet in the awareness of the pathos of life, the Japanese found profound beauty.”¹

How interesting that Jesus gets to experience this act of beauty from Mary, just days before his death. This act of extreme care, skin-to-skin, an infusion of sweat and tears and love, is a holy act and a transformative moment for Jesus. I like to guess that this experience was so profound to Jesus, that he began his Last Supper with his disciples by kneeling to the ground and carefully washing *their* feet.

In case you can't keep track of which Mary this is— the New Testament has at least 3 with prominent roles— this Mary is one who has a deep friendship with Jesus, and he is an intimate part of her family. Clearly Mary and Jesus loved one another; we don't know the nature of that love, whether they were like family, or she his disciple, or maybe they were something else. Maybe you remember Mary's sister Martha— she's the practical one, who sets about household tasks and even nips a bit that time her sister Mary chose to sit and listen at Jesus' feet, instead of performing her gendered role of serving chores.

¹ Makoto Fujimura, “The Beautiful Tears” on <https://makotofujimura.com/writings/the-beautiful-tears>, October 11, 2010.

Or maybe you remember Mary's brother Lazarus, whom the gospels say Jesus loved, who became sick and died. Mary and Martha each registered their complaint before Jesus: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." This lament is both a bold statement of faith: that Jesus *actually* holds power over life and death— and an accusation: because he has this power, Lazarus' death is his fault. When Jesus asks that they roll away the stone, Martha— always the practical one— resisted "Lord, he has already been dead 4 days! Think about the stench!" Still, Jesus called into the tomb: "Lazarus, come out!" And Lazarus emerged, still wrapped in his burial cloths, until Jesus commanded, "Unbind him, and let him go!"

News spread about this throughout Judea, and it greatly concerned the religious leaders, because if the dead can't stay dead, then what *can* we count on, really? Not only that, these leaders had choreographed a careful dance with Roman power— some in protection of the Jewish people, so that their lives may be preserved in the shadow of a great and tyrannical rule, and others in alliance with Rome, as they benefited from tyranny. Jesus raising the dead was a strange and disruptive twist to this dance, and quite dangerous, too.

We see Lazarus in this dinner gathering at their Bethany home. Already, the religious leaders had plotted to kill Jesus, and commanded that anyone who had knowledge of Jesus' whereabouts must report him. I wonder about Lazarus, someone who has seen death for 4 days. What did he know that he wasn't telling us? What did it look like? What did it sound like? What did it *smell* like?

I imagine after having smelled death, Lazarus couldn't care *less* what the Roman authorities thought of him. Freed from fear, I imagine him at dinner, while everyone else held the anxiety of being found out, even being executed, Lazarus was mindfully chewing each bite of bread, heaping praise upon Martha for the delicious fish, savoring each sip of wine— perhaps even this time, offering to help his sister Martha with the chores of serving and cleaning.

As Mary saw Lazarus with his life made new, her faith was made new. Too overcome to show her gratitude with words, she showed it by performing an act of beauty. Taking the jar of ointment her family had meant for Lazarus' death, she broke it open.

The artist Fujimura wrote, "Art, like Jesus' tears and Mary's nard, spreads in our lives, providing useless beauty for those willing to ponder. Many consider the arts to be the "extra" of our lives, an embellishment that is mere leisure. Yet how many hours of sacrifice go into being able to play a sonata by Chopin? Or a dancer's flight on stage at the Lincoln Center? What many consider extra, and even wasteful, may come to define our humanity. That evening at Bethany, in that aroma that Mary spilled, there were Leonardo da Vinci's paintings and Johann Sebastian Bach's cantatas floating in the air... Every act of creativity is, directly or indirectly, an intuitive response to offer to God what [God] has given to us."²

² Ibid

Trees, flowers, oil, hair, beauty and mercy are all fine and good. But what about the poor? Judas raised a very valid question, even if the gospel makes clear his hidden intent was more about siphoning off money for himself than to feed the hungry. Some would say that Jesus' response, "There will always be poor among us" justifies poverty. However, Deuteronomy 15:11 records God's command, "Since there will never cease to be poor on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.' We can assume that Jesus implicitly understood that care and justice for the poor would *always* be a part of his mission and legacy. But tending to the body, in that moment, was a salvific act that mirrored Jesus' offering of his own body in days to come.

Salve— the meaning of it is an ointment that provides healing and protection. Each night until the warmer weather comes, we slather our daughter's hands in Aquaphor, and then cover them in cotton gloves so that her skin renews while she sleeps; usually she does this herself while we tuck her in, but sometimes it's a mother's hands that massage salve, skin to skin, into her hands and wrists, fingers lacing through fingers. When we do not do this ritual, her skin becomes raw and chapped from her multiple hand-washings and hand-sanitizer; we are in a pandemic, and she thinks more about germs than I ever did as a child.

That ointment Mary generously poured onto Jesus was not just an expensive spa treatment. It represented salvation itself. Mary modeled with her body that our bodies can be vehicles for salvation, as she prepared Jesus for offering his own.

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, in making and sharing art or music. 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.

What Mary shows us is that our bodies are vehicles for salvation. This anointing involved an exchange of dirt for ointment, of the lowest part of the body with the highest part of the body. Mary, with her hands, her sweat, her tears, 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. Though its purpose seemed senseless, its value was priceless.

Are there small or large ways you can share that beauty and mercy that points us toward salvation? For some, it may be serving food to the poor, or gardening, or playing Bach. It could be the care with which you help prepare our worship space. I have noticed that in those times when I can quiet the rush, and sit down with my child at her art table and make something together, something holy happens. It's certainly not in my artistic ability; instead, I suspect that as we share in a creative process, we are tapping into the creative power of God. The stresses of the world lift a bit as I am mindful of how color spills on paper, or allow myself to be taught by a technique my daughter has learned. This is not escapism; rather, it is blessing through creation, that prepares me for taking part in God's ongoing creation and redemption of the

world. As a pastor, I know I can be more ready to pray with someone having the worst crisis of their life when I have taken these moments for creative blessing.

The poet Wendall Berry speaks about the sacred value in doing things that don't add up in a culture of profit and production. Here are words from his poem "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front"

So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world...
...Ask the questions that have no answers.
Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.
Say that your main crop is the forest
that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest.
Say that the leaves are harvested
when they have rotted into the mold.
Call that profit. Prophecy such returns.
Put your faith in the two inches of humus
that will build under the trees
every thousand years...
.. Be joyful though you have considered all the facts....
As soon as the generals and the politicians
can predict the motions of your mind,
lose it. Leave it as a sign
to mark the false trail, the way
you didn't go. Be like the fox
who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.

Mary used an ointment that was for death and burial, to anoint Jesus— while he was still living. So what about you? Why wait until you die? What can you do, in this life, today, to practice resurrection?