

We are rounding the corner and heading into the final stretch of our Lenten journey, this 5th Sunday of Lent. The noise we hear just up ahead is the crowd gathered in Jerusalem waiting with palm branches in-hand to welcome Jesus on his way to the cross. Today's Scripture lesson is a final stop on the way—a moment for us to come up for air and reflect on how this time of Lent has been for you and me, *personally*.

What has been forming within you during this season? What lessons have you been learning? What expressions of your faith are being shaped, or formed anew, in the fires of waiting, prayer, and sacrifice? These questions aren't just rhetorical—I'd love to hear from you at some point if you're willing to share.

Our text this morning from John chapter 12 sets up a bit like the opening to a comedy bit: 4 characters walk into a dinner party. And what a cast of characters they are! The first one is introduced in an oddly-casual way. In just a few short words, we are told that Jesus has come to Bethany, where Lazarus was, the one whom Jesus just raised from the dead! There now was Lazarus, *alive!*, back on the guest list, and *lounging* at table with Jesus. The gospel writer is content to understate this.

Yet, as astounding as this is, it wasn't Lazarus for whom the gracious host has setup dinner; Jesus was the distinguished guest. If there was any doubt, Mary (Lazarus' sister) made it emphatically clear in what is perhaps the most lavish act of adoration and, dare I say, intimacy, which we might find in all the Bible. There—at center stage—Mary assumes a most humble, even humiliating, posture and bathes the feet of Jesus in expensive perfume, bringing the party to a halt. This extravagance is most uncomfortable to those looking on.

It would have been enough for Mary to have simply emptied the fragrant bottle onto Jesus's feet, yet she bends even lower, taking down her hair, and proceeds to wipe his feet clean with it—a

scandalous gesture by a woman in that time, who was not to let down her hair except in the privacy of her own home and in the most intimate of settings (that being with her husband).

Judas is also there. Yes, *that* Judas! And he wastes no time trying to wrestle back some of the attention that was now fixated on Mary's act: "Why was this perfume not sold...and the money given to the poor?" You can imagine Judas puffing up with pride at such a pious question. And with this, he at once condemns the humbled Mary—hoping to keep her in her place—while also challenging Jesus's approval of this display. The gospel writer makes clear that Judas has no pure motive of his own here. Ever-opportunistic for personal gains, Judas decries this waste, seeing his profits waft away with the scent that now filled the house.

"Leave her alone," Jesus responds. In Mark's version of the story, Jesus adds, "She has performed a good service for me." He says, "You will always have opportunities to help the poor—that reality will never go away—but you will not always have me here with you."

Lazarus, Judas, and Mary. And a fourth, Martha—who, we are told, is serving. 4 characters. 1 dinner party. Sounds like the trailer to a Netflix mystery series.

I had a sneaking suspicion this week. And with a quick google image search, my suspicion was largely confirmed. It would appear that by and large the way this scene is depicted in the canon of sacred art is far more cleaned up than what I'm imagining. Try to picture some of what I found. In one particular image, you see Jesus's spotless European foot gently resting on a golden-tasseled pillow and Mary's perfectly wavy brown hair lightly grazing the top of it. In other images, Jesus is comfortably seated in an ornate wooden chair, leg extended, onto which a single drop of oil falls from Mary's bottle.

Scanning through image after image: There is hardly a mess of spilled oil. No dust, no dirt. No oil-soaked, matted hair. These were instead replaced by marbled floors and European sophistication. In more than one image, Mary was using a towel and not her hair.

And part of my suspicion was to wonder if we have domesticated this scene, taming it down just a bit, or perhaps rushing to over-spiritualize the act. Could it be that Christians have been too uncomfortable with this sort of love? Judas certainly was—along with the other disciples who were there grumbling as they looked on.

Perhaps I'm being a bit telling here; my family will quickly confirm that I do NOT like messes. I am the type that shudders when something breaks. And I'm certain a part of my soul dies every time there is a spill in the house. I may be exaggerating a bit, but I like things neat, orderly, in their rightful place. I like aesthetics that are pleasing to the eye, Instagram-worthy. I assure you, I've been working on this. Because, you see, this doesn't go well with twin 11-year-old girls in the house. Messy spills are inevitable. Things *will* break. In fact, I'm told "the mess is part of the fun!" Though, I'm convinced that glitter was invented to be clean-up proof. And glue somehow always ends up everywhere but where you intend to use it (parents, can I get an "Amen"?).

Children know better what us stodgy adults have unlearned: the process of bringing about something beautiful into the world will inevitably include a measure of disorder and mess. Some things will need to be broken in the process. You must get your hands a little dirty! This is true of arts and crafts, as it is of a delicious home cooked meal, as it is with bold, costly love.

Mary's display is messy, and intentionally so. We have to sit with this for a moment to appreciate the tension it creates for us: A vial is broken, pieces scattered everywhere. Its oily contents slowly spill onto dusty, traveler's feet, mixing with the dirt of both foot and floor. The aroma consumes the entire house like walking through the perfume section of a department store.

Scholars say that this particular oil called "Myron," from which we get the word *myrrh*, would have been imported on camelback from India. It was a pure oil so it wasn't watered down. It was from the spike nard plant and used to anoint the dead, so it had immense staying

power. We have to image that its strong scent would have clung to Jesus' feet even a week later as he hung on the cross. Think about the poetry in that!

Christian art cannot adequately capture Mary's act. I wonder if it doesn't want to. I wonder if this is all a bit too sensual, too non-sensical, too unorthodox. There is a lesson for us in this: Parties are where Jesus goes to disrupt the norm.

Just when we think we have it all figured out, Jesus asks of us to go bigger, expand our thinking. Just when we've buttoned-up our faith and polished our eloquent theology, Jesus shows up at our party. Just as we have set the proper order of who is our neighbor of first concern and who gets the last of our care and provision, Jesus shows up at our party. Just when we have defined the epicenter of "God's country" and position everyone else outside that boundary, Jesus shows up at our party. When we have determined the socially acceptable limits of gender and sexuality, Jesus shows up at our party. When migrants—valuable and contributing members of society—are detained and questioned, Jesus cries, "Leave them alone. The way you treat them, you also treat me."

You see, Jesus shows up—where there is the audacity of love! He's there ready to break some things open and make a mess of our neat and tidy ways.

In 1 John 4:12, it says, "No one has ever seen God; But if we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us." Something is at stake here. Do you hear the implication? "No one has ever seen God, BUT IF..." The original Greek word (eán) used for "But" and "If" is inserted as a *conditional* conjunction. This means that it is both a word of possibility but also of caution. It is both opportunity and warning. It is conditional. What comes before the conjunction is dependent upon what comes after it.

What the Apostle John is saying is this: God's image in this world hangs in the balance. Whether or not this world sees God depends on whether you and I love one another. How else can it be?

"No one has ever seen God, but if you put together some really nice church programming..." "No one has ever seen God, but if you come up with an air-tight theology..." "No one has ever seen God, but if you put on a facade that you have it all together..." No. That's not what the text says. Audacious, norm-disrupting love is the catalyst. It is by that which we SEE.

My seminary preaching professor liked to use the following analogy: The disciples were asked to remove the rocks from in front of Lazarus' tomb before Jesus could go in and raise the dead. Surely, Jesus could have included the removal of the rocks as part of the miracle, couldn't he?! That seemed much easier than raising the dead! Yet, the disciples had a role to play. That's been a helpful image for me. It keeps me from becoming complacent assuming that God doesn't need me to do God-things. Jesus asked them to roll up their sleeves, get their hands dirty—maybe a little nicked up in the process—before the miracle can take place.

When you risk the audacity of love, you are moving stones so that God can come in and work a miracle. You want to be a world-changer, have the audacity of love. You want to change your community, your country, your church, have the audacity of love.

Maybe the implication of the other side is too obvious: If we do not love one another, God is relegated to just another nice idea, a proposition to be discussed among theologians, not a tangible force for transformation.

Your senator, Cory Booker, gave a 25+ hour sermon on the senate floor earlier this week, breaking the record for the longest speech in U.S. Senate history. And I agree with many that it was like going to church, for the portion I was able to watch. I assure you my sermon will not challenge this record. And please go look up some clips if you missed most or all of it. It's quite powerful.

At the apex of Booker's message was the question: "What is the quality of our love?" It's almost as if Senator Booker knew this week's Lectionary text. He goes on to preach: "Now is the time to get angry,

but let that anger fuel you... to get scared for what's happening to your neighbors, but let that fear bring about your courage."

Dear siblings of the Presbyterian Church in Leonia—What is the quality of your love? Because I believe our world is left starved and aching in the wilderness of so many other superficial loves. Ours, too, risks becoming calcified, inert, and ineffective if we do not love with a fierceness, with a senseless abandon... if it does not include a measure of risk and mess.

We are starved to see God. Could it be this is why more people are going out the back door of Big-C Church than coming in the front? Has our love become too polite, too buttoned-up, too systematic? Maybe our love is too provisional and people have become skeptical of its reciprocal demands.

What is the quality of our love? Is it the kind that is willing to have some things broken—be it customs or language which may have grown tired, or worse, harmful in our time?

What is the quality of love for the people at the Presbyterian Church of Leonia? Is it the kind that helps this community see God?

Beloved siblings, let's roll up our sleeves and make a little mess.
Amen.