

What an amazing lesson we have before us this morning, such a vivid and moving story about Jesus and an act of love towards Him. Love that is expressed through the anointing of Christ's feet. This caused me to think a bit about feet and the kind of contact we typically have with other's feet. We might wash a baby's feet; we might enjoy purchasing for ourselves the indulgence of a pedicure; we might rub our spouse's tired feet. But generally, we don't have a lot of dealings with other people's feet, isn't that right? I mean, feet are sometimes dirty or smelly, and they seem quite personal to us. I remember well a woman in my second parish who told me how she went weekly to visit her elderly father in a care center and cut his toe-nails for him. I was greatly impressed that her love prompted her to assume this uncomfortable position and carry out this lowly and probably rather difficult action that requires careful and finely-tuned precision. I thought---this is really a tribute to her loving spirit! And then I thought about Jesus washing the dirty feet of his disciples on Maundy Thursday following the Last Supper, and the significance of this kind of humble, caring act took on a more powerful resonance for me.

Who is it that performs this act of love for Jesus, who assumes this humble posture? It's none other than Mary of Bethany and here's something amazing about her; in the only 3 Scriptural references to Mary of Bethany, she is on her knees and at the feet of Jesus in each of them. Let's just be clear here for a moment about which Mary this is, because the Gospels are full of Marys; it must have been at the top of the list of baby names for girls at that time. This is *not* Mary the mother of Jesus. This is *not* Mary Magdalene, the ardent follower of Jesus and the first witness to the Resurrection. No, *this* is Mary of Bethany. The first mention of her is in Luke's Gospel, where Jesus comes to visit in the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus of Bethany, a set of three adult siblings sharing a home, who seem to be among Jesus' closest friends. As you recall, Martha is getting everything ready for the meal that day, while Mary kneels before Christ and listens to him talk; she is at the feet of Jesus, in the attentive posture of a student. When Martha rebukes her sister for not helping out, Jesus responds that Mary has actually chosen the more important part, that of listening to their guest. We meet Mary again when this family of 3 siblings experiences a tragedy; the brother, Lazarus, dies. This story is recorded in

the gospel of John, the same Gospel we have before us this morning, and it's in the chapter directly before this one. Jesus comes *after* the death of Lazarus to console the sisters, and Mary falls on her knees at before Him and sobs, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Again, she is at the feet of Jesus, this time in deepest sorrow. That story ends with the raising of Lazarus from the tomb. It's an astonishing story that also includes an unusual detail—an olfactory, or scent, reference. When the tomb is opened for Jesus to raise Lazarus, the ever-practical Martha comments, "Lord, there will be a stench, for he has been dead for 3 days." You'll see why I lift this up in a moment but think about how scent is so evocative for most of us.

Now, we again meet up with this family, including Mary, in just the chapter following the death and raising of Lazarus. Mary is *again* on her knees before Christ, this time anointing his feet with that invaluable perfumed oil and wiping them with her hair. She is at the feet of Jesus, this time to express deep love. And there is another olfactory reference in this story as there was in the Lazarus story: we are told that the scent of the perfume fills the house with fragrance. You can almost smell it, can't you? This is not the kind of detail we hear very often at all within the stories of the gospel. Between these two chapters, John 11 and 12, we've gone from death to life, and in that marvelous olfactory detail, we've moved from the stench of decay to the fragrance of perfume. That contrast makes both of these stories more real to us. And, Mary is yet again on her knees before Christ. So, the three times we meet up with this Mary of Bethany, she is at the feet of Jesus---once as a student looking to learn from her Master; once in sorrow, pouring out her grief to her beloved friend; and once in an act of extraordinary love. In all these different circumstances and life seasons, Mary is at the feet of Jesus. I have to believe there's a powerful lesson for us there; is there any better place for *us* to be, then at the feet of Jesus?

Thinking about the times we might assume such a posture and position leads me to think about Holy Communion, especially in the form we practice it on the first Sunday of each month. Today is the first Sunday of the month, and we are going to kneel at our altar rail this morning and receive Holy Communion. Admittedly, some will stand rather than kneel due to physical situations, but all of us are kneeling in spirit. This morning our Holy Communion at the altar is a little bittersweet for me. This will be the final time I will be

presiding within this church over Holy Communion when we kneel at the altar—because the next first Sunday of the month will fall on May 4, when I’ll be at Synod Assembly and Pastor Kris Garey will preside at Holy Communion at the altar. Kneeling at the altar for Holy Communion has a gravitas for me that goes back to my childhood days in the Methodist church. We only communed once every 3 months, but it was *always* kneeling at the altar. That posture spoke volumes to me then, and it still does to this day. Since Christ is our host, when we kneel to receive communion, we are, in essence, on our knees before Jesus. As Mary of Bethany was in our lesson. And assuming that posture helps us to *embody* so much good theology: our love and devotion for Christ; our humility before God in receiving this holy meal; our equality with one another, no one lesser or greater, all of us on our knees before God. Like Mary of Bethany, we will kneel before our Lord. In a gesture of humble, loving, devotion.

But Mary does more than just kneel before Christ in our lesson, she also pours out that spiced fragrant perfume upon his feet, an over-the-top gesture of gratitude and love. Why is she so moved to make this gesture? Because her brother, Lazarus, who was dead in the tomb in the preceding chapter of this Gospel of John, is raised to life and sitting at the table with them, enjoying a meal and conversation between the best of friends. Her joy knows no bounds! And why do I call the gesture “over-the-top”? Because it was! Consider what we know about this perfume, which was a fragrant pure nard, as described in our text. According to Judas, at least, it was worth 300 hundred denari, about the annual earnings of the typical peasant worker at that time. Let’s translate that into our time and place, using the fact that the MN state minimum wage is a bit over \$11 an hour. So, multiply \$11 an hour times 52 work weeks of 40 hours each, and you find yourself at \$22, 880. Which means that Mary has a jar of perfume worth over \$22,000. Good Lord! That means it’s worth around \$1,400 dollars an ounce, because she has a pound of it. Today, expensive perfumes are typically sold in bottles ranging from 1 and ½ ounces to 3 and ½ ounces. We know that Mary has 16 ounces, a *pound* of expensive perfume. How could Mary afford this? We don’t know. Perhaps there was wealth within this family of 3 siblings. Such an expensive perfume and such an extravagant amount of it, would have typically *only* been used for the anointing of royalty or the burial of some very significant person. Yet notice that the sisters hadn’t used

it for the burial of their brother, who had been dead and buried about a week earlier. Now that brother is back among them, raised from the dead in a miracle foreshadowing Christ's own resurrection, shortly to come. And the One who worked this miracle, who turned these sisters' overwhelming sorrow into disbelieving joy is among them, at their table, eating their food, right now; and Mary knows that *this is the moment to act*; and she does it up, and she does it up big. Not just part of the jar, but the whole pound is poured onto Christ's feet. And she doesn't use a towel, she uses her *hair* to wipe those feet off afterwards. Oh my! This is not the done thing! And what does this brave and vulnerable and unconventional act of devotion demonstrate? The importance of expressing love and of doing it while we may, in the present. You know how often we delay or moderate our impulsive, loving gestures? *Mary doesn't do that.*

Her gesture was so extraordinary that it aroused critique among those present, chiefly Judas, who demands to know why so much money was spent on something so superfluous, when others are in need. Of course, we look disdainfully at him in hindsight, but I think most of us have an inner Judas in this regard---I think *we often* judge other's expenditures as displaying poor choices on their part. Thrift and frugality are inborn virtues for many of us. I also think we so typically *restrain* big and generous gestures, whether our own, or others---neither Scandinavians nor Midwesterners are known for practicing abandon or lavishness in our spending or expressiveness. Furthermore, it's not that Judas doesn't have a valid point, in lifting up the need to care for the poor-- although we are told his real motivation was to pad the common purse so he could pilfer more from within it. But, how *do* we balance out spending money on non-necessities, when some do not have *even* the necessities? For example, nationally, can we justify money spent on space exploration when people on our own *planet* are in need? Or congregationally, can any congregation justify spending to make improvements to their building when the community around them includes low-income folks? Or personally, should every Christmas and birthday present be a donation made in the recipient's honor to the church or the world hunger appeal or the Salvation Army? Is it ever all right to indulge another or even ourselves in a burst of spontaneous generosity and love? With these questions in mind, we have to wonder how Jesus will react to Judas' critique. Will he agree with him?

He does not. Jesus defends Mary's expression of love. Not because He doesn't care for the poor. The verse, "The poor you will have with you always" should *never* be misinterpreted as being a casual dismissal by Christ on the needy. Far from it! Much of his ministry has been focused *precisely* on the poor and needy. But Jesus makes the realistic evaluation that there will always be poor people among us. Why? Frankly, because our human nature is too often expressed in ways that impoverish others, or in ways that we impoverish ourselves. However, we shouldn't use this as a cynical reason not to give to the poor. Rather it should suggest to us that steady and *ongoing* generosity *and strategy* is needed from us all to combat poverty. We need to approach poverty from both the perspectives of immediate assistance, but also systemic changes. There are no quick fixes. Jesus knows this.

But in this instance, unlike most of his ministry, Jesus' focus *isn't* on the poor. It's on Mary and on her gift to him. He responds by telling Judas, in effect, that Mary somehow knows his time among them may be short. She intuitively senses his death approaching and wants to act now. While there is still time, she chose to give a gift from the heart. And Jesus graciously accepts her gift of devotion.

Here is what Mary of Bethany models so well for us. She expressed her love for Jesus, in a big way, while she could. She didn't put it off, she didn't overthink it and decide she really shouldn't do it; she just went for it. I am confident that each of us here today is blessed with people God has given us to love, and in so loving them, we show love to God. Isn't that so? Do we express that love? Do we say the words, write the note, make the phone call, give the gift? Do we even risk being extravagant or foolish in order to make our point? You know, for many of us, to be extravagant or foolish is the last thing we want to be! Still, isn't it far better to be a fool for *love* than to be a fool for the reasons we typically *are* fools? Certainly, God in Christ, seems to think so. There was no limit to what God was willing to do or give out of love for us, including the folly of the cross. On that instrument of execution, Christ pours out his very blood and life for us, in an act of unsurpassed love and generosity. Loving with abandon is more important than observing propriety.

So, what of our gifts of love, not only to others, but to *God*? Gifts of praise, of prayer, of service, of song, of money---do we dare to give these gifts, at least on occasion, with abandon, with extravagance, with whole-hearted devotion? God looks to us to give with open hearts and to receive with open hands. That's what Holy Communion is for us; God's love in bread and wine given for us, received with open hands, as we kneel in humble devotion at the feet of Jesus. Kneeling in love before our Lord, as Mary of Bethany did. God holds back nothing in giving to us, not even God's self. We can also trust that God joyfully receives our gifts of love, whatever they may be or however they be flawed. *Because in the giving and the receiving, it is the loving that matters.* Love that is expressed *now*—while it can be. Amen.