

SLD03.25.07 5th Lent
Emory Presbyterian Church
John 12:1-8
Jill Oglesby Evans

“An Extravagant Response”

At this point in John’s gospel, and on this 5th Sunday of our Lenten journey, the way is being prepared for Jesus’ death.

You see, in the gospel of John, leading up to today, or rather to this *evening* that Jesus is spending with his friends in Bethany, Jesus has executed seven dramatic miracles among the people, signs specifically designed to reveal his call as Life-Giver.

Already he’s turned water into wine at Cana; healed the official’s son in Capernaum; made a cripple man walk and a blind man see in Jerusalem; fed the five thousand by the Sea of Galilee, and for an encore, walked on water. But his crowning achievement, the miracle that *really* makes Jesus the talk of the town is when he raises his friend, Lazarus, from the dead. Now, when Jesus does that, when he raises Lazarus from the dead, why, as far as the Jewish establishment is concerned, he’s flat taken the whole Life-Giver thing waaay too far. The people are acting way too wowed. Jesus is getting way too much attention. Some think he’s getting bloody dangerous. In fact, the rumor going around is that the high priest Caiaphas plans to kill Jesus when he shows up in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover.

Lazarus and Mary and Martha, in whose house Jesus is having supper in today’s text, they’ve probably heard that rumor. They’re also the ones who can probably the best just why Jesus poses such a threat to the Pharisees. If anybody were categorically convinced of Jesus’ status as the ultimate Life Giver, these three are. All three have witnessed with their own eyes, with their own hearts, and in their own lives, Jesus’

unfathomable power to give life, even in the face of, wresting it away from, even the relentless grip of death itself.

Why, the very existence of Lazarus, whose name means the one “whom God helps,”¹ is living, breathing proof of Jesus’ life-giving powers, and therefore anathema to the Jewish authorities. Yes, of all Jesus’ followers, Lazarus, Martha and Mary know best who Jesus is, and what he is capable of. And too, perhaps, the price he is about to pay for being such a threat to the status quo.

Surely this is Mary’s motivation for lavishing expensive nard on Jesus’ dusty feet; to prepare him for his imminent burial. Apparently, Jesus thinks so, as he chastises Judas for fussing at Mary’s profligate behavior. “Leave her alone, Judas. She kept this scent for the day of my burial.”

Now Judas, of course, thinks Mary’s act is a silly waste of shekels, money that could have been used to help the poor. Of course, John makes sure we all know that Judas is the bad guy and hardly worth listening to. “You know Judas,” says John, “the one who was about to *betray* Jesus? You know, the *thief*? The one who stole from the common purse?” Who’d want to listen to *him*, right?

Let me say here that I’m not entirely convinced that Judas was so much the bad guy of the gospels as the “fall guy.” But that’s just me. Sure, he wasn’t perfect, but none of the disciples come off all that slick. And in this particular matter of Mary’s extravagance, I think Judas may have a point. I mean, what Mary does is only a symbolic act of understanding of, and solidarity with, Jesus’ impending death, why *not* use Jergens or Neutrogena – which generic brand can be had at Target for under three bucks a jug - and give the savings to the poor? Seriously. Was it absolutely necessary

¹ Lectionary Homiletics, www.goodpreacher.com, 3/21/2007, “Exegesis: John 12:1-8,” p. 1.

to use the most expensive perfume available for a fleeting moment of symbolism, however intimate or prophetic?

Take another intimate and prophetic act of symbolism, important to us today, like communion. Does it really make any difference whatsoever whether we use pita or French bread, homemade or store bought, or that funky little pre-stamped pez bread for communion? No, it doesn't! A sacrament is an outward sign of inward grace – it's the inward grace that matters, not what we use as the outward sign of it! If our hearts are genuinely open to feasting on the bread of heaven, it doesn't matter if we use Cheetos!

Why *else* might Mary have chosen the most expensive, the most exquisite, the most extravagant, nard with which to anoint Jesus at this special time?

There's an apocryphal tale – “apocryphal” means a story rooted in biblical tradition but found outside of scripture – there's an apocryphal tale that one of three wise men present at Jesus' birth was the great Babylonian magus, Asshur, who traveled from the east to understand the meaning of a great king, heralded by stars, yet born in squalor.²

When he arrives and is alone with Joseph, Mary and the child, Asshur slowly draws out a small alabaster jar from a dark velvet case. Bequeathed to Asshur by his father, no one knows who once scooped it out of the purest marble. Marble, the fruit of limestone, the rock closest to the element of water, source of all life. As a magic vessel, it had once so long ago been used to anoint the feet of the hero, Mithridates; its worn soap-smooth surface is covered with enchantments. Asshur places the vessel before on the cool beaten earth before the sleeping child. Mary smiles.

² Meyer, Gabriel. “Tale of the Alabaster Jar,” *In the Shade of the Terebinth*, Twin Circle Publishing Company, 1994, pp. 47-53.

Intoning the blessing reserved for kings under his breath, the Babylonian sage breaks the jar's imposing wax seal, releasing in the hovel's four corners an aroma reserved only for the nostrils of gods.Then, with a trembling hand, the old man shatters the sacred jar upon the stone hard earth before the mother and child. Perfume floods the dark recesses of the room as the old man contemplates the pile of broken shards at his feet. Hands dripping with myrrh, Babylon's greatest magus then, with strokes of infinite tenderness, anoints the five senses of the sleeping infant.

Mary's eyes search his for some explanation of what he is doing. To which Asshur says, "I am anointing your son for the trials of his manhood. Tell him, when he is of the age of understanding, that when another breaks the jar before him, he will know that the hour for which he was born...is at hand."

In today's text, another breaks the perfumed jar before Jesus, again, with strokes of great tenderness, anointing the full grown man. For the hour for which Jesus was born...is at hand. And sure enough, what follows Mary's anointing of Jesus is his unalterable march toward suffering and death, for which she offers is the treasure of her insight and understanding. Remember that Mary has recently seen death; seen it, smelled it, and witnessed its devastation; the whole of her heart goes with Jesus in what he is about to endure.

At the same time, remember what *else* Mary has recently seen, and smelled, and witnessed: not only the illness and death of her brother, but the stench of his flesh, four days dead, as he stumbled *out* of his tomb. Mary has not only recently witnessed death, she's witnessed death defeated. Defeated by Jesus the Life Giver. Perhaps it is not only *death* for which Mary is preparing Jesus; perhaps prophetic Mary sees *beyond*

the tomb. Maybe the unfettered extravagance of Mary's giving is not merely a symbolic act of solidarity with Jesus on his road to death, nor even just overflowing gratitude for the life Jesus gave once before. Perhaps Asshur and Mary both understand that the hour for which Jesus was born is not just the moment of his death, but the new day that God will wrest from it. Remember that Mary knows well who Jesus is, having witnessed with her own eyes, in her own heart and in her own life, just what he is capable of. Perhaps the extravagance of her offering is a function not only of the life Jesus once gave her brother, or even the life he is about give up, but of the Life that his life will give again, and again, and again.

The day Jesus raised Lazarus, he said, "I am the resurrection. If anyone believes in me, even though he dies, he will live, and never die. Do you believe this?" he asked.

Well, yes, Mary does believe this. So when the hour comes for which Jesus was born, the hour in which he will be glorified, she offers him everything she has and everything she is. At this point in John's gospel, and on this 5th Sunday of our Lenten journey, Mary prepares us for Jesus' life; the life he will give *for*, and the life he will give *to*, the redemption of all creation, again and again and again.

What could possibly be too extravagant to give in return?

[Ellen's lovely liturgical dance]

To the glory of God. Amen.