

John 12: 1-8
Lent 5C
April 3, 2022

Carried Away

We've spent most of Lent walking alongside Jesus through the gospel of Luke as he makes his way to Jerusalem and the cross. Today, one week before Palm Sunday, we find ourselves in the gospel of John. The last time we were in John, Jesus changed water into really good wine at a wedding stunning everyone—including his own mother—with extravagant abundance. In chapter 11, Jesus comes to Bethany after learning that his friend Lazarus has been ill and has died. Jesus weeps with Lazarus's grieving sisters and then stands outside the tomb, and he insists that the stone be rolled away, even as Martha, Lazarus's sister warns that the stench of death will be overpowering. Jesus calls for Lazarus to come out and he does. Following Lazarus's return to life, the religious leaders grow increasingly anxious, and Jesus goes into seclusion for a few days with the disciples. Then we meet him here in our text for today. [Read John 12: 1-8]

When I was a child, my family sat in the same place in church most Sundays. We sat in a pew almost at the back of the large sanctuary, similar to this one, over on the lectern side. I can easily remember straining to see babies being baptized. I can picture my mother handing me a tissue from her purse and shushing me when I sniffled too loudly for her liking. I can hear my mother and my Aunt Rodie (yes, I really had an Aunt Rodie) singing hymns enthusiastically off key. I remember my father greeting friends and strangers before and after worship with his warm smile, easy laugh, and maybe a corny joke or two, just as he did this morning, I'm guessing. And I remember Mrs. Taylor sitting in front of us. Mrs. Taylor was one of the most glamorous women I knew. She was (and still is) beautiful. Tall with perfectly coiffed strawberry blonde hair, she wore bangles that jingled as she spoke; and she wore perfume, Jungle Gardenia, I think

it was. That was over 40 years ago, but when I close my eyes, I can almost catch a whiff of that perfume; I can almost hear the jingling of those bracelets, and I am once again a child enveloped in love and warmth and beauty.

In our text for this morning, Jesus has returned to Bethany, to Lazarus's house for a dinner. It seems a small thing to give a dinner party for the man who brought you or your brother back from the dead. But isn't it difficult to imagine *any* gesture that could fully respond to such a gift? A gracious "thank you" and a good meal is as good a way as any. We are told that Martha is serving and that Lazarus is at table with Jesus. Then Mary comes on stage. She carries a jar of perfume, approximately 12 ounces of costly perfume. She pours it on Jesus' feet and wipes it away with her hair. We hear Jesus' response and Judas's response; everyone else remains silent, but it's not a stretch to imagine that the others are shocked as well. It's an outlandish gesture, a wasteful, extravagant over-the-top way to say thank you. It's also an intimate, boundary-troubling act. An unmarried woman would only let her hair down if she were in mourning; women as a rule kept their hair tucked away except around their husbands. Jesus interprets Mary's act as more than a thank you. He reads her action as a foreshadowing of his death.¹ Looking back as a gesture of thanks and looking ahead in anticipation of Jesus' impending death, Mary's extravagant—even outlandish—gesture is an act of unbridled worship and adoration. It's messy; it's excessive; it's just not done.

As you know, we learn about Jesus and his life through the narratives recorded in four gospels. The gospels are not transcripts of every moment in Jesus' life and ministry. Not everything is written down. They are the authoritative and inspired witness to the life of the one who comes to bring life, and each gospel offers different stories, different accounts, different

¹ *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, footnote on verse 7.

emphases. Only a few stories show up in all four. We only hear about Jesus' birth in Luke and Matthew. The parable of the Lost Sons appears only in Luke. The cross and the empty tomb appear in all four, of course, as does an account of a woman anointing Jesus with perfume.² So the early Christian community must have found something especially powerful in this story. Something about this woman's witness captures the early community's attention. To understand the Jesus story fully, this story must be told; this story must be written down.

The text makes it clear that the scent of that perfume fills, even "fills to the full" the room.³ There is no escaping the scent of the perfume; there is no escaping this excessive, extravagant, beautiful act of worship. In stark contrast to the stench of death that Martha warns Jesus about at Lazarus's tomb just a few verses before and the pall of death that lurks just outside the doors just beyond these verses, this act of devotion overshadows and overpowers all else. Even as Judas makes a half-hearted plea for the poor, the perfume lingers. It is not as though the poor do not matter. They always matter, especially to Jesus, and Jesus expects the poor to matter to his body, his church. In fact, Jesus assumes that his church will always be shoulder to shoulder with the poor, the marginalized, and the left out. That is a given. That is the context. Always. So it is in the midst of this context that Mary's gesture captures everyone's attention. This gift to the one who gives life is remembered. This act of over-the-top worship and gratitude still lingers.

I have fond memories of Mrs. Taylor not strictly because of her glamorous ways, but because of the way she was and still is with me, because of the love she poured out and still pours out whenever she sees me. The scent of her perfume reminds me of her glorious smile, of her insistence that I must be her very own child because of our similar hair color, and her conviction that I was one of the most beautiful children she had ever known—even when I was a

² As pointed out by my colleague Meg Peery McLaughlin in her paper for The Well, February 2012.

³ <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/03/the-sweet-smell-of-faithfulness.html>

shy, beyond-awkward 11-year-old. The lingering scent of her perfume evokes powerful memories. That perfume reminds me of the strong, unembarrassed hug she gave me on my parents' front steps as my mother lay dying when many people were hesitant and even afraid to visit. The lingering scent reminds me of an over-the-top, extravagantly loving woman who wanted me to know beyond all else that I was loved and treasured. The power of that love lingers—stronger than death, stronger than the passage of time.

In a few moments we will gather around the table where we will share a meal. While the crunchy wafer and the few sips of juice do not offer the fragrance of freshly baked bread or fine wine, my hunch is that you can imagine that heavenly scent without stretching your imagination too far. That fragrance has a way of lingering. I recall the distinct smell of yeast rolls or granola bread rising under damp tea towels in my mother's kitchen. That fragrance is one forever linked with a sense of devotion, adoration, and abundant love. Dr. Stephen Shoemaker tells the story of Anne Smith who founded the Charlotte Food Rescue. With her station wagon stuffed with doughnuts on her way to a shelter, Smith stopped by what is now the Bank of America tower in Charlotte to appeal to some of the bank's executives for support:

As she rode the elevator to the top floor, someone said, 'You smell like doughnuts!' She laughed and told [them] why, and by the time the elevator door opened, she had recruited another. [Shoemaker continues,] The fragrance of love's actions is carried on the wind to places we never see.⁴

The fragrance of love's actions is carried on the wind to places we never see. Perhaps that's one of the ways Judas misses the point of Mary's act. It is not a question of either service or worship, rather it is a matter of both/and. The two are intertwined. Love is known not simply in the

⁴ Dr. H. Stephen Shoemaker, "Homiletical Perspective: John 12:1-8," *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2 (Westminster: Louisville, 2009) 143.

writing of checks, but also in the fragrance of meals being cooked in the kitchen for guests at the night shelter, the scent of flowers given to a grieving widow from a neighbor's garden, the smell of library books curated for children in the Education Building, and the scent of a precious baby's head dripping with water from the font. With each we are reminded of the beautiful gift of life, life that is abundant and good and gracious, life that is ours in Jesus Christ.

As you well know, we live in a world filled to the full with the threat of death and despair. War rages in Ukraine and Ethiopia. God's beloved children suffer and die from violence, disease, and hunger in our own backyard and a world away. Families and communities are ripped apart by addiction, mental illness, hatred, suspicion, cynicism, and fear. Just as Mary's gift did not change or soften the brutal suffering and death that lay ahead for Jesus, our gathering for worship in this light-filled space does not erase any of the world's suffering or our own heartbreak. Mary's gift lifted up the beauty of Jesus' gift, not apart from God's beloved world but in the midst of that world and for that world's sake. In much the same way, the beauty we encounter in worship gives us strength and courage to engage and embrace God's beloved world with the love, hope, and beauty we encounter here. Like's Mary's poured out perfume, that love, that hope, that beauty remind us that the stench of death cannot and will not stake a permanent claim on us. The Light of the World, the Word of God, Jesus Christ himself is the author of our life and the center of our worship. His devotion to us lasts and lingers, for Christ has staked a permanent claim on us. In him, God shows death the door; in him the fragrance of life fills us and our lives to the full. In Jesus Christ we are given life—excessively, extravagantly abundant life. One might say that Christ gets a bit carried away, in fact. It is my hope and prayer that we might get a bit carried away, too, that our life together is and will be an excessively, extravagantly abundant response to Christ's gift to us. It is my prayer that our worship and

witness in here and out there will fill this world to the full with the scent of faithful devotion, with beautifully extravagant love, kindness, and generosity. And by the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit, may the world catch a glimpse of Christ in us, as we boldly remind everyone everywhere that they are deeply, extravagantly adored, just as we are.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.