

The Fifth Sunday in Lent
St. Paul's Cleveland Heights
April 6, 2025
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+In the Name of God: Who was, and is, and is to come. Amen.

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. John 12:1-3a

The Gospel writer, John, really packs a lot of information into just a few verses this morning. And although I really dislike the verb, "to unpack" – unless it's used to describe what someone does with a suitcase at the end of a trip – I'm going to do my best to "unpack" the Gospel reading this morning.

Today's story takes place in the small town of Bethany, not far from Jerusalem. I suppose we would say it was a suburb of Jerusalem, but no one knew about suburbs back then. So Bethany wasn't a suburb in the way we think of suburbs. It was, however, close – within easy walking distance of Jerusalem – only about two miles. For many pilgrims who were traveling to the Holy City, it was the last place they stopped for the night before they started the steep climb up out of the Kidron Valley to the Temple itself.

Mary and Martha and their brother, Lazarus, lived in Bethany. They were Jesus' friends – members of a family he had come to know and love deeply. The two sisters and their brother weren't disciples in the usual sense. They hadn't answered Jesus' call to follow him as Peter and James and John had. They had a different relationship with him, a relationship Jesus cherished. Jesus was able to be himself with them. These were people with whom he could just be a friend.

Sometime before our story opens today, a remarkable event had happened that profoundly affected Jesus' relationship with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus – one that proved to be a turning point in Jesus' ministry. Lazarus had become very sick, so sick that, after only a few days, he died. Mary and Martha had sent for Jesus as their brother's condition worsened, begging him to come, but Jesus did not come – at least not right away. It's not clear why. He had been in Jerusalem not long before, involved in intense debates with the Jewish leadership there – debates so intense that his opponents tried to stone him. You see, Jesus told them that he and God were one, and they thought what he said was blasphemy.

Other leaders in Jerusalem, instead of trying to stone Jesus, tried to arrest him – attempted to take him into custody. "[However, Jesus] escaped from their hands." John writes, "He went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing earlier, and he remained there." Jesus may have felt safer there, and he may have been reluctant to re-engage

with the Jewish leadership so soon after his most recent skirmish with them. Bethany was awfully close to Jerusalem – perhaps too close for comfort.

Whatever the reason Jesus delayed, Lazarus died before he arrived in Bethany. I'm sure he knew it was too late to heal Lazarus long before he got there. Barbara Brown Taylor doesn't mince words about the situation Jesus found when he finally got to Bethany. She says, "Lazarus was so dead that he stank, so dead that Jesus stood in front of his tomb and wept." And then a remarkable thing happened. Jesus performed a miracle – the greatest of all the signs he ever performed. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead.

It's not as if we need to be reminded about the raising of Lazarus as our story begins in this morning's Gospel, but John reminds us anyway. He writes: "Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead."

Now, raising someone from the dead is not something that happens every day. I have been present when a person has been resuscitated in the emergency room, but I don't know of any situation where this has happened after a person has been dead for several days. The people of Bethany had never seen anything like the raising of Lazarus either. What Jesus did was every bit as strange and marvelous to them then as it would be to us now. And, so, not surprisingly, word got around pretty quickly. In fact, word traveled right up the road to Jerusalem where Jesus' enemies were still smarting from their recent battles with him and angry with themselves about letting Jesus escape when they had him right where they wanted him.

What was the reaction to the raising of Lazarus? John says that a few members of the Jewish leadership believed in Jesus because of the miracle, but "some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done. So," John writes, "the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council – [that is, the Sanhedrin], and said, "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation."

In other words, Jesus had become a serious problem for the Jewish leadership – so serious that he threatened the careful political balance between a wary occupying force commanded by Pontius Pilate and those Jews who had chosen to collaborate with the Romans. They chose to collaborate for all the reasons collaborators cooperate with occupying forces – to line their pockets, or to enjoy a little derivative power, or, sometimes, because they believe they can soften the impact on their own people by joining forces with the occupiers.

John says that Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, [listened to the others talk about what to do with Jesus and, when he had heard enough,] he said to them, "Don't you know anything? Can't you see that it's to our advantage that one man dies for the people rather than the whole nation be destroyed?" The raising of Lazarus turned out to be the last straw for the Temple leadership. As one commentator puts it, Jesus had gone from being a "manageable nuisance" to a "serious threat."

This is the situation Jesus faced when he traveled back to Bethany for the dinner at the home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus. The Sanhedrin had made up their mind about him. They have decided he must die for the people rather than have a whole nation destroyed. The irony of the High Priest's statement about Jesus isn't lost on John. John sees it as an unintentional prophecy about what Jesus will accomplish through his death on the cross. What is clear is this – by giving Lazarus his life, Jesus signed his own death warrant.

This, then, helps us understand the unusual act performed by Mary at dinner when she anoints Jesus' feet with a perfume made of pure nard. Nard, or Spikenard, comes from a flowering plant that grows in the Himalayas of India and Nepal. It was an extraordinarily expensive item. Judas Iscariot says it could be sold for 300 denarii – or almost a year's wages for a first century laborer. To use the perfume to anoint Jesus is an act of total extravagance, as is Mary's act of letting down her hair in public – something not done by women in that time and place – and then wiping Jesus' feet with her hair – certainly not done by an unmarried woman to an unmarried man.

John contrasts the extravagance of Mary with the stinginess of Judas on purpose – and the contrast is about more than just money. It is about the contrast in their attitudes to the One who is at the table with them – the One who, during Holy Week, will demonstrate God's extravagant love and God's extravagant mercy.

Whatever Mary thought she was doing – or whatever anyone else at dinner that night thought Mary was doing – Jesus saw it for what it clearly was – it was a prophetic act that represented his being anointed for burial – a burial that, six days later, would happen so fast that there would be no time for anointing his body – no time before the stone was hurriedly rolled into place before the Sabbath began at sunset.

Like the Hebrew prophets who often emphasized what they said by performing similar prophetic acts, Mary was acting out a prophecy. These same Hebrew prophets sometimes let their prophetic acts stand alone, replacing any words they might have said. Think of Ezekiel's eating the scroll as a sign that he carried the word of God around inside of him – or Jeremiah's smashing a clay jar to show what God's judgment on Jerusalem was going to be like.

These actions were similar to the kind of thing Mary was doing. She was performing a prophetic act that said, "This man, this man whom I love, this Jesus, will be dead before a week has passed. His will be a death that signifies the depth of God's love for us. I am trying to do my best to match this extravagant gift of God – this man who is here right before us in the flesh. I am trying to do my best to signify the reckless outpouring of God's mercy for all humankind with the extravagant outpouring of this perfume. I am giving Jesus the most valuable thing I possess, knowing that my gift to him cannot even come close to matching his gift to me. But I will do what I can with what I have, and it will have to be enough. I will do this because no one will ever have the chance to honor him in this way again.

So what about us as we sit in this lovely church on this Fifth Sunday in Lent? What is our response to God's love for us? What would it take for us to risk being as extravagant as Mary

was? To give what we value most in our lives to honor Jesus? Each of us has to think and pray about these questions – and listen to our hearts for the answer.

I can tell you what one person said. That person was Isaac Watts, who wrote many of the hymns we still sing today – hymns like, “O God our help in ages past,” based on Psalm 90 and “My shepherd will supply my need,” based on the 23rd Psalm.

Here’s the last stanza of what is, in my opinion, the quintessential hymn for this time in the church year. It’s the hymn, “When I survey the wondrous cross.” [We are going to sing it as the presentation hymn this morning.] Listen to the words of the last stanza. Watts lays out what is, for him, the only possible response to the gift of God’s love in the person of Jesus.

He says, “Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small. Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.”

Love so amazing, so divine, demands *my* soul, *my* life, *my* all. What does this love demand of you? What will be your response to God’s extravagant gift? May our response be every bit as extravagant as Mary’s was. Because here’s the thing as we move toward Holy Week, Jesus is God’s extravagant love in the flesh. And God’s Love always wins.

Amen.