

“Love Unbound”
The 5th Sunday in Lent - April 3, 2022 - John 12:1-8/C
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The preacher’s task is often full of twists and turns. For example, how does one choose what this congregation needs to hear on this day in this place? What interesting information from the Bible and our experience will lead to a gospel message that moves your heart? With a veritable buffet of themes, how can we cover it all? For example, today we are sensing increasing danger for Jesus, we have the first hint about Judas’ heart and motivations, there is a comment about the constancy of poverty, the relationship between siblings, an intimate dinner with family and friends and the overwhelming smell of anointing oil.

Author Vladimir Nabokov writes, *“Smells are surer than sights or sounds to make your heartstrings crack.”* I’m sure you have all had this, or a similar experience: all I need is to catch a whiff of Old Spice, and my father and all the older men in my childhood are instantly in the room with me. Or I come into a house when cookies are baking and all the women of my family are alive and well. Smelling mown grass, burning leaves or horses will return me to the house I grew up in, because remembered smells conjure emotions, and can transport us to a different time and a different place. They can take us home again, to the places where we began.

So, if you were the preacher, how would you prepare humanity for Jesus’ death? We, too, understand that life is an endless struggle *against* death. Our hearts fear it, our lives deny it, our culture tells us we can beat it. And yet, deep down, we know we will experience it. Death is a human preoccupation, and even the church marks its reality every year with a 40-day ritual called Lent. It begins with crosses of ash smeared upon your forehead, and the admonition, essentially, *“Don’t forget. You are going to die.”* Then, Lent ends with Jesus’ Passion and his death on a cross.

You may have noticed today that we have moved from Luke to John, who is clear in his Gospel that Jesus is the Son, the essence, the beloved of God. So how does Jesus prepare himself for death? Well, not unlike us, he seeks out the familiar. Jesus goes home to where it all began - the disciples, the teaching, the healings. It was here at the Jordan River, where John the Baptizer had proclaimed, *“Look! There is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”*

Now, Jerusalem is beckoning, and everyone is wondering if the Rabbi and his followers would dare appear. Then Jesus arrived at Bethany - *six days before* Passover - on the very day that the Passover lambs were purchased for the sacrifice, then taken into homes to be inspected. If they were without blemishes, they would be cleaned, brushed and oil would be rubbed onto their feet. The only other time *feet* were anointed was when a priest was preparing to perform a sacrifice.

But in the midst of this gathering gloom, Jesus was swept into a wonderful reunion, sitting again at Martha’s table. Had they even had time to visit about the restoration of brother, Lazarus? Or to find out Jesus’ plans for the Festival? Had they heard any rumblings of violence in and around Jerusalem? The dinner conversation: full of funny moments, *“do you remember the time we...?”* politics and religion and their connection to one another. It was like old times - with host Martha serving, and Lazarus’ empty place at the table filled with his presence once again. Then their sister Mary comes to the table with an alabaster jar of perfumed ointment - oil of spikenard - used traditionally only for anointing a King, or burying the dead. Mary is emotional. She kneels beside Jesus. And there she is as we always picture her: at the feet of Jesus. For that is where she belongs, where she feels most at home.

I think Mary understood. She got it...maybe because Jesus seemed to be the only one to “get her” as Martha bustled and hustled all around her, or left her behind when Jesus arrived at the

time of Lazarus' death. On this day, she reaches out to rub sweet smelling oil onto Jesus' tired feet – 6 days before Passover - a Lamb is being prepared for sacrifice.

Did you ever think about how the disciples expressed their love to Jesus? Thomas, upon seeing the Risen Christ in the flesh exclaimed, "*My Lord and my God!*" Peter began his 3-fold erasing of his denial with a 3-fold declaration to Jesus, "*You know I love you, Lord...*" Even Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea illustrated their newfound belief by their action of burying the body of Jesus with 100 pounds of spices. How did they all express their love? ***They believed him. And then they acted on their belief in him.*** So do you ever think about how you do that? Do you know how you can show Jesus how much you love him in this time, in your lives? There are three ways illustrated in today's three main characters. Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Consider them:

First, we can express our love through worship, like Mary. Remember the story of Mary and her sister Martha from your Sunday School days? That's from Matthew and is the only other information we have about them. There, Martha is doing all the work involved with hosting guests in her home, and Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet, listening. Jesus defends Mary by saying she "has chosen the better path." At that moment Jesus was elevating Mary's actions. He was releasing her from being bound in the traditional role of a woman in a household, and welcoming her as a student - a religious listener. She was being invited into an experience not readily available to women of the day, so Jesus was actually unbinding her from traditional mores and inviting her into a whole new way of life.

Is this why Mary chose to give up an expensive bottle of essential oil to sooth Jesus' feet after his travels? Was it symbolic of what he had done for her already and who he truly was? The Greek word used here for anointing suggests this was a "common" anointing; perfume used against the unpleasant odors of the ancient world, and to soothe and refresh. Yet, some believe she was acting as his anointer. Jesus was the "anointed one" translated as *Messiah* in Hebrew and *Christ* in Greek. On three separate occasions, Jesus is anointed with fragrant ointment in His work as the Savior, the King of heaven who was in preparation to die to save His people. Perhaps Mary was simply completing the proclamation. Some others surmise that Mary was preparing Jesus for burial, and Jesus does mention it himself. Yet Mary seemed to know that this was the last evening these friends would be together. It was her last chance.

And, she certainly exceeds good taste. It is difficult to hear this story today without raising an eyebrow. At the very least, Mary's use of her hair is one of profound intimacy, the unbinding of long hair was reserved only for wives and husbands. Yes, this is an expression of love so deep that it causes us to feel the need to avert our eyes, to look away. This exchange is not for us...

Mary surely would have known that both Jesus and Lazarus were facing life-threatening danger; she would not have had plans to go out into the Passover crowds. And, if we read the rest of John's gospel, Mary of Bethany has no role in the burial preparation of Jesus' body; in fact, she is not even among the women who were nearby during his crucifixion. This is the last time we will see Mary of Bethany. But, could it be that her worship, her expression of love, foreshadows Jesus' own loving action of washing the feet of his disciples, "*on the night he was betrayed.*" ***For Jesus unbound Mary to worship him freely - to listen and learn and grow - always at his feet, in humility. Mary's love, unbound, was released into loving worship of her Lord.***

Second, we can express our love of God through service, as Martha did. Martha is a woman of means, and although Scripture does not tell us how she came to this position, she is the head of a family of two women and a man - a household that is large enough to hold many guests. In all three stories she is acting as head of the house and host of the home. It is assumed that she continued with these resources throughout her life, and would have certainly allowed the fledgling Christian movement to gather in her home. She is unique in the fact that only Peter beat

her in confessing Jesus' identity for the first time when he said, *"You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!"* Martha proclaimed the same belief when Jesus arrived at Lazarus' tomb, *"I believe you are the Messiah, the one coming into the world!"* In fact, the word used in the Bible for her "serving" is the Greek, *diakonos* - meaning minister or deacon. Martha filled the role of those who would be set apart to serve the community with their hospitality and welcome - with food and shelter - with the good news of the Resurrection. As an early deacon - perhaps she even presided at the Eucharistic table in her home. ***Martha was unbound by Jesus from the traditional role of every female in ancient society. Martha's love, unbound, lifted her up as a deacon in the church, worthy of leadership through service.***

Finally, we can express our love of Jesus, the Son of God, our Risen Lord and Savior, through our witness, just as Lazarus did. Lazarus's presence at the table that night confirms that death does not speak the final word to us. He simply was the witness to the power of God over death and life in their very midst. He was living proof, evidence that demands the verdict that Jesus Christ is who he said he is - the beloved Son of God - the Messiah, the Christ - our Savior. With every breath he took, Lazarus was testifying about the truth of Jesus' ministry, death and Resurrection without ever saying a word. But tradition tells us that he did speak and the free flow of gospel good news flowed out of his body, freed from death and a three-day entombment. ***Lazarus was unbound from the grave cloths that he was wrapped in, when Jesus called him out of his tomb of death with the words, "Unbind him, and let him go."*** Freed from death he began his new life, itself a powerful testimony and witness to the cycle of Life. Death. and New Life in Christ.

Are you feeling bound, in need of release to fully express your love to God? All you need do is come to the foot of the cross, to the very feet of Jesus, and ask that the love that was planted in you by the Spirit in the waters of your baptism, may be loosed and set free this very day. Perhaps you might want to reflect upon the last words in verse 3: *"And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume."* When Mary cracked open that jar of nard, the fragrance flowed everywhere. When she wiped his feet with her hair, she took its smell with her on her whole body.

So I invite you, as you come or go from the table of grace this day, to pause at the center cart and dip your finger in the bowl of oil. Rub it into the back of your hand or trace the sign of the cross on your forehead where you were sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever - the same place we marked with Ash almost 40 days ago. Inhale the perfume of frankincense and myrrh - carried on your skin - clinging to you throughout your day. In this way, prepare your heart for what is to come: Life, Death and New Life.

As you breathe in the Holy Spirit and the aroma of love from the One who gave his life for us, think about the fact that such a strong perfume would have lasted a long time. Imagine that everywhere Jesus went--as he rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, as he gathered with his disciples in an Upper Room, as he appeared before the High Priest and Pilate, the fragrant perfume still lingered. Perhaps, even as Jesus uttered his words of forgiveness and completion on the cross, he might have sensed a faint, sweet fragrance that reminded him that he had been greatly loved." I hope that scent reminded him of his Father's voice of blessing, and of going home... Amen.