

Year C, Lent5

April 7th, 2019

Thomas L. Truby

John 12:1-8

“The Scent of Love”

“Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume,” this according to John’s Gospel.

Two sisters invited Jesus to a dinner party in Jesus’ honor. Can you smell the food simmering on the fire, the fresh bread baking in the oven, the wine as the cork is pulled? Their brother, Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead in anticipation of his own resurrection, was at the table. Not often that you have a dinner attended by a formerly dead person. It’s the gospel writer’s way of preparing us for what is about to unfold on this fifth Sunday of Lent.

Jesus, their beloved friend, had stirred up huge controversy and tension when he raised Lazarus from the dead. Rome didn’t like it and neither did the people at the temple. They were trying to decide if they should execute Lazarus, along with Jesus—that would put an end to this story about his being raised from the dead—get rid of the one raised and the one who raised him. In the Gospel of John the raising of Lazarus sets the crucifixion machine in motion.

While the air in Bethany, a town just outside of Jerusalem, was fresh and pure and their home smelled of hot bread, olive oil and wine; the air in Jerusalem was thick with tension and foreboding. Passover, the celebration of Jewish identity, where they believed God passed over and didn’t kill Jewish children but did kill the Egyptian children, was approaching in six days. Rome was on high alert. Would there be a nationalist uprising again this year and would Rome ruthlessly suppress it as usual?

The crowds in Jerusalem were beginning to gather. Animals were being herded into the city to be sold for sacrifice in the Temple. Soon Jerusalem’s air would smell of sprinkled blood and burnt flesh, the spring air overcome by the acrid smell of death. The aroma of pure nard and fresh air and the anxiety and stench of death contradict each other. Which will the residents of Jerusalem choose?

Mary and Martha wanted to get Jesus out of the city. They knew the dangers and were afraid for him. Martha served food and Mary opened a canister of perfume and poured the entire

content on Jesus' feet. The perfume cost a small fortune. The house was filled with its fragrance. Mary undid her hair and wiped Jesus' feet with it. Can you smell the perfume?

Why did she do it? What did she mean by it? It was a lavish gesture of unreserved devotion. She threw aside all caution and practicality in an extravagant, outrageous social act. It's like the prodigal's father who threw aside his dignity and ran to meet his returning son: kissing and hugging him and later begging his elder son to come to the party. The father pours out his extravagant love on both his sons like Mary pours perfume on Jesus' feet. Soon Jesus will pour himself out at our feet; the feet of the human species—God dying at the hand of human wrath, a complete reversal to the usual human projection that God is wrathful and demands blood.

With the reversal of meaning we begin to understand the fifth chapter of the Book of Revelation where the writer, John of Patmos, hears myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice, "'Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!'" Then John of Patmos says, "I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, 'To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!'" All the creatures in the world are singing in praise and gratitude to Jesus, the Lamb of God sacrificed to human wrath. All the creatures know that God is so strong God will die to our rivalry with him rather than engage us in an over-against fashion.

Mary, intuitively seeing more deeply than the disciples who still hope to find themselves on the inside of a new empire, gives expression to a powerful impulse arising within her. She sees the Lamb and understands the power of his vulnerability. She can't find words to say it and so pours a fortune in purest nard on his feet. Its' fragrance fills the house like the voices of Revelation fill Heaven.

Paul writes: "I consider everything a loss in comparison with the superior value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I have lost everything for him, but what I lost I think of as sewer trash, so that I might gain Christ and be found in him. In Christ I have a righteousness that is not my own and that does not come from the Law but rather from the faithfulness of Christ." Like Paul, Mary senses the faithfulness of Christ and pours herself out in gratitude. She spreads the scent of his love with her hair.

But not all live in gratitude for a gift beyond their understanding. "Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), complained, 'This perfume was worth a year's wages! Why wasn't it sold and the money given to the poor?'" He wants to build favor with the crowds by giving money to the poor hoping to enlist them in the revolution he believes God is

bringing. His is the story of the world. His vision goes no further than us vs them. He is in rivalry with Jesus on what should be done to save the people.

“Leave her alone”, Jesus snaps. “She bought the expensive perfume so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.” His burial! They came to Jerusalem to conquer not die. The disciples, still in denial, are blinded by their ambition. Mary intuits how this will end though she couldn’t explain it with words. Jesus interprets the meaning of Mary’s actions.

And that business about always having the poor, that’s not Jesus shrugging his shoulders in the face of poverty. It’s another hint to his disbelieving disciples that the end is near. You will always have the poor but you will not always have me, he says. You have from now till the end of time to serve the poor and you must. But you won’t be inspired to do that unless you get what I am here to reveal to you. It is only as you understand me as the One rejected, as the supreme victim, that you will feel empathy for the poor. If you are present to the Lord’s Passion, a passion about to begin, and the Resurrection that follows; the determination to care for the victims of the world will gradually become a permanent feature to your soul.

Jesus knows the end is near and Mary’s actions point to the costliness of what he is about to do. He was about to lay down his life for the world by revealing the awful secret humans have always feared knowing. He will show the world that humans usually build culture on violence and exclusion by allowing that violence to exclude and kill him. Mary, this sensitive woman who has just poured her life’s savings on his feet and filled the room with its sweetness, squarely faces reality. She sees the forgiving victim who embodies God’s love and responds with gratitude and devotion. She fills the house with the scent of love. Let us draw it in on this fifth Sunday of Lent and live from its forgiving power. Amen.