

Sermon for the fifth Sunday in Lent
 April 3, 2022
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Good morning. GOOD MORNING! This week I want to tell you the sermon begins before I even say good morning to you. The sermon each Sunday begins when we read the word of God aloud in the congregation. We are hearing the Living Word of God among us just as those closest to Jesus—Mary and Martha, the disciples, and Lazarus—heard Jesus speaking to them in their homes, in the fields, face to face. This is how close the Living Word comes to us each week; Jesus and the Spirit are moving among us when we hear God's word.

When we hear the gospel each week, we only get a snippet, a small portion, a vignette, like a window opening on an Advent calendar. It can be hard to know what to make of it. So too, today. We see Jesus dining in the home of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. We see Mary anointing Jesus' feet with nard, an expensive perfumed oil. But what are we to do with this scene? How can we make sense of this little picture we are given?

This is why context is so important. This is why we as Lutherans resist taking a single verse of scripture out of context to prove a point or win a fight. As Lutherans, we know that the stuff surrounding that verse or story are important to understanding it. The context for this scene in the gospel is that just a little while ago, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus had been dead for four days in the tomb, and Jesus returned to a grieving Martha and Mary and restored their brother to life in a very public, dramatic way.

What follows, is a dinner in the house of Martha and Mary, maybe in Jesus' honor. Maybe, probably in wild gratitude for bringing back their brother from the dead. Their weeping has been turned to joy. This is important to know because you cannot go back and erase the past. Not in our lives, not in the lives of Martha and Mary

either. Lazarus' sickness and death, his body lying in the tomb, that sorrow and loss will always be with them. But also, they are witness to God's extraordinary love even amidst their trauma. And their trauma is transformed by grace. They are changed forever. Maybe for us too in wave after wave of the pandemic. Maybe for us too after the loss of friends or loved ones. Maybe we too can be changed by God's grace.

In this light we see Mary's anointing of Jesus for what it is. Pure gratitude. An act of devotion and love for Jesus' goodness in their life. Overcome with God's bountiful love and grace in her life, Mary wanted to express her joy, her happiness. She wanted to give something back to the One who had given her more than she dared hope for. And this is one way we can look at stewardship. A giving back to God in gratitude for all the blessings we have been given.

We have all experienced God's grace in our lives. We have all been given good things by the Holy One. If we haven't, we wouldn't be sitting here today. Or maybe you haven't seen or felt the goodness of God in a while. Maybe you are just sitting here hoping, hoping for an abundance of love and grace. Hoping the Loving One is hearing your prayers. I have been there too, all hope and no certainty. Mary and Martha were definitely there when Lazarus was dying. But God surprised them beyond their wildest expectations. Even after their hope had been completely lost.

Now nard is a perfumed oil, and it's very expensive. That little bottle cost a whole year's wages. It was precious and Mary used the whole bottle anointing Jesus. Nard was used to anoint the dead. Mary and Martha probably had it on hand to anoint their brother Lazarus after he lay in the tomb. But they didn't need it anymore. Mary took the costly oil that she had purchased in her sorrow and was able to use it in her joy instead. Notice how its scent filled the whole house. It permeated every room. Every person at the dinner could smell the wonderful perfume. God's grace is like that. Once we see it, we begin to see it everywhere.

Once we see it, we see how it touches every single person near it. A beautiful smell in contrast to the stench of the tomb that Mary was worried about after her brother had laid there for four days. In contrast to the house full of grief and sorrow. In contrast to our fears and our worries that we will not have enough, will not be taken care of. God's grace is able to transform everything. What is it that Jesus says in John 10:10? "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." Martha and Mary, Lazarus, you and me.

In the same way, we are called to live our lives out of God's abundance, to share that overwhelming love and grace with others. One way to look at stewardship is letting the best we have experienced in our lives or from God have the maximum effect in our lives and the lives of others. Mary's best gift was the return of her brother Lazarus, so she shares the riches of her joy with Jesus by anointing his feet.

Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet also points to the same action Jesus will take just a few days later. In fact, the word wipe used to describe Mary's action in Greek is *ekmasso*, the same verb used to describe Jesus' wiping the apostles' feet during the foot washing at the Passover meal.

Each year during Holy Week, we read Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet on Maundy Thursday. The word maundy comes to us from the Latin word *mandatum*, or commandment. As in Jesus saying to his disciples in John 13:34-35 "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." This is so important, that Jesus tells us twice, to love for one another. To care for one another. Like Jesus. Because of the care God has shown us. Because of Jesus. Because of the goodness in our own lives, which comes from the Loving One. Again, the disciples are commanded to let the best they have experienced, the love and presence of Jesus, have the maximum effect in the lives of others by loving others in the same way Christ has loved them.

This is how Jesus would have us be. Like himself, like Mary is doing. In contrast to Judas in the gospel today. Poor Judas gives voice to our fears and worries. Gives voice to the fear that if we give too much, we might not have enough later. That if we make too big a gesture, people might start talking about us. Judas talking, as our doubts might saying, "there are better ways to give back," or, "you have already given back," or "let's think about this for maybe a year or two." He might be saying, "Mary, you have been through a lot with your brother dying and all. You still might be in shock with your grief. You don't want to rush into anything." And Jesus' response is always larger than our fears, just like the Loving One's grace.

Jesus says, "You don't have to choose me or the poor. You can care for both. Goodness is never wasted. There is always more grace to be found. Giving back is a sign of your love, a sign of your care for others. Even a sign of your hope. Maybe especially a sign of our hopes.

Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet, Jesus washing the feet of his disciples all point to loving and caring for each other. Hoping that if today you are in grief, I might help a little, and in helping take you a little bit closer to the end of your sorrow and into rejoicing. That I might share a little of the richness and joy I have known with you, who need it now. This is what we might call kin-dom living. This is why we are called to give. We share the goodness we have received from God. We share in our trust and hope that even now the Loving One still has more in store for us. For Christ Lutheran Church. For our world.

With one act, Mary transforms all that has come before into something new. So too with God. So too with us when we let God in. When we set aside our worry and our fear. When we put our hand forward and we pray, "Jesus, bring us all that abundant life that you have promised."