

## What Love Smells Like

### *John 12: 1-8*

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup>There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup>"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" <sup>6</sup>(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) <sup>7</sup>Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup>You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

We imagine the scene. Jesus at his friend's house for a home cooked meal. There's Martha serving up the fixings. Lazarus is there after Jesus brought him back to life. It's a week before Passover—before the cross. We might imagine the chatter is light-hearted until Mary enters the room. The vibe turns somewhat somber as Mary takes perfume she's saved for a special occasion, pours it upon Jesus' feet, and wipes them dry with her hair. It's perhaps the most intimate moment in the gospels. It's so intimate, it is hard to imagine what an equivalent might be today. But we know one thing: it's a ritualistic anointing which prepares Jesus for what is about to come. It's an intimate thing, a holy thing, to bless what death will soon touch.

Begin with a confession: the subject matter of death isn't our favorite. None of us enjoy talking about death, even people of faith. To be honest, I was tempted to offer you a trigger warning about the story. Over the last two years, we have faced so much loss my temptation was to protect you from death's raw reality even though we all will face it at some point. We protect our children from it; we protect each other from it. But truthfully, who are we really protecting?

Perhaps even the gospel writer moves us away from the intimacy of the moment too quickly. Lately when this passage comes up the focus is on Judas' words about the poor and Jesus' response when he says, "The poor will always be with you, but I will not." Lots of social justice commentaries trying to correct what sounds like Jesus' justifying poverty, which he doesn't if we go deeper. It's tempting to focus on that, but that is another sermon for another day. Today is about the painful, touchy subject we would all like to avoid...even people of faith.

Except, notice the gospel puts death's reality front and center. No trigger warning, or room to escape it. Death's reality is pernicious even for Jesus. A few verses earlier, Jesus is at Lazarus' tomb weeping. Remember what was said about the burial site? It said it, "stinketh!" because death does stink. But contrast that moment with this one where Mary takes sweet smelling perfume and fills the house with a different fragrance. It's hopeful and true: the gospel confronts death because death doesn't have to only stink. Mary blesses Jesus intimately for when the time comes, which makes me wonder if even the end is something we can bless as well.

I'll never forget the story about a man who was nearing his end. His closest friends gathered to throw him a *bon voyage* party. With his favorite music playing in the background, they shared precious memories as they laughed and cried and told him how much he touched their lives. It was an intimate moment—a holy moment—which blessed the fullness of his life from beginning to end. Then for a night cap they twisted open a bottle of his favorite scotch. They passed the bottle around, sipping and smelling as the aroma filled the room. [breathe in deeply] Can you smell it? It's what love smells like. Yes, death stinketh. Yes, death, as Bert used to say, feels, "all too final."

But there is also another fragrance present in the room. A love which is so powerful that even death's stench is covered. Jesus is anointed during an intimate moment of blessing. A rare perfume is lavished over him. [inhale deeply] Smell that? It's what love smells like.

So perhaps, this Lenten season, we need to set aside some intentional time to bless those we've loved and lost. Over the last two years we've said *bon voyage* to nine beloved members. Some of us have said farewell to friends and family members. The last two years we have smelt death's presence everywhere—it stinketh! In part what has made it so impossible has been the pandemic's isolation. Funerals postponed. People just seemed to silently fade away. And we could not grieve or honor the dying as a community. We could not bless their ending.

The good news is: it is never too late. We are a people who desire to bless one another, even on the way out—which our faith teaches is also our way into another reality. Last year, our deacons went around dropping off flowering plants to people in the church who lost someone. They recognized it wasn't too late to bless someone and tell me: was it the plant or the presence of another which blessed them the most? [inhale deeply] Smell that? It's what love smells like.

So each of you have a piece of paper with the names of the nine members we've said goodbye to over the past two years: [Ginny Carr, Dick Patterson, Bea Stuber, Parker Maddrey, Carol Edmunds, Bert Gronseth, Bobbie McLeod, Julia Doub, Jerry Peeples]. You might want to add another name or make it a general blessing for all of them. On the paper is room for a blessing. It could be a memory or something you are grateful for about them. Could be a blessing or a prayer in their honor. After the service I will hold the baptismal bowl at the exit for you to place your blessing. For those on Zoom, feel free to email me a blessing and I will add them to the others. We will turn these blessings to ashes and scatter them in our garden on Maundy Thursday. We need a ritual, an intimate moment, where we can say *bon voyage* with a blessing. It's what love smells like. And we are a people who continue to bless one another with love, even on the way out. Amen.