

“You Won’t Always Have Me”

a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno for April 3, 2022

based on John 12:1-8

The day before he entered Jerusalem for the last time, Jesus stopped in to see his friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Their home in Bethany lay in the heights, near Jerusalem. According to John, Jesus may have visited the home of these two sisters and one brother many times. They acted as an extended family for him. They call him “Lord,” but with them he could be very much a man. Perhaps there had been many memorable dinners -- full of good food, good humor.

Days before the dinner in this morning’s text, he performed a CAPITAL “M” miracle – raising Lazarus from the dead. And Jesus, the man, “wept” having heard of his friend’s death.

According to this gospel, the miracle has put Jesus at the top of the religious right’s “most wanted” list. Jesus’ days are numbered and he knows it. Maybe these dear friends pick up on it when he arrives for dinner. Perhaps they see it on his face. In any case, they take Jesus in – shut him away from the world for the night.

They make a wonderful supper for him. Martha is in charge, of course; everyone is fetching or chopping things, except Lazarus who is maybe not the man he was before the tomb. We don’t know.

In the midst of this, Mary slips away – she’s off looking for something in her room. She comes back, quietly, ever so slightly secretive. Every one sits down to supper around low tables. The disciples are unable to NOT look at Lazarus. You don’t see such a man every day.

Lazarus sits there, perhaps unaware that he and his rising from the dead may be the cause of what is rising to a crisis for Jesus with the religious authorities.

The sense in John’s gospel is that Jesus has, in fact, traded his life for his friend’s life ... unless he can find a way to escape the net that is drawing tightly around him now.

After supper Mary produces the thing she fetched earlier; an expensive jar, full of spikenard; something brought by traders along the Silk Road, all the way from Afghanistan. She breaks the jar’s neck as Martha had broken the bird killed for supper.

And just as the smell of the bird had filled the house, now that smell is overwhelmed by the smell of this costly perfume. One interpreter says it’s something between the smell of mint and ginseng.

Then Mary does four remarkable things in a row.

First she loosens her hair in a room where there are men, which a “respectable” woman would never do. Then she pours this balm on the feet of Jesus, which also is not done -- maybe on the head, but not on the feet.

The intimacy of the event more than doubles when she touches his feet with her hands.

Finally the *coup de gras* -- she wipes his feet with strands of her flint black hair. Love and death bound together forever in one picture.

The whole thing leaves them all speechless. As the narrative comes to us from *John* it is an absolute jewel among the stories in the New Testament.

Now, it's easy to get this account of the ointment mixed up with different versions of this story in the other three gospels.

In Matthew and Mark the woman is unnamed. She is merely a woman who interrupts a dinner at Simon the Leper's house – she pours nard on Jesus' head there in front of everyone

In Luke's account she is a woman of questionable reputation who washes his feet with her tears and covers them with kisses before rubbing them with myrrh.

Only in this account in John's gospel does she really have a name. She is not a stranger or a sinner – she is Jesus' long-time friend.

She loves Jesus. He loves her, and the whole thing seems to be a bit “over the top.”

And Judas, scandalized, speaks up. “Why was this ointment not sold for 300 denarii and the money given to the poor?”

Now, maybe Judas' motives are shoddy and he wants the money for himself, as the author of this gospel says, but, look, he does make a point: a day laborer and family could live for a year on such money.

“Leave her alone,” says Jesus, “she has this ointment so as to anoint me for my burial. You will always have the poor with you and you can do right by them whenever you want, but you will not always have me.”

I find this one of the most moving and remarkable things he ever says. It's just beautiful, in the same way that *he*, and so much that he does, is beautiful.

You know, there is a time for everything. Judas has no sense of the times or the seasons, and that is exactly what this story is about – knowing what a specific time calls for.

Here's my point -- Sure, it is better to give than receive, but we all need to know how to receive as well as to give. Part of the gorgeous genius of Jesus is he gets this totally.

You know, for a lot of people receiving is a very hard thing. People get mixed up about gifts, and in a thousand different ways. Some people just can't accept them.

I adore the following extract from Marilynne Robinson's novel, *Gilead*. I suspect a number of you have read it. With a degree of impatience, the protagonist in the novel describes his grandfather who was always losing or giving things away ...

I have a certain acquaintance with a kind of holy poverty. My grandfather never kept anything that was worth giving away, or let us keep it, either, so my mother said.

He would take laundry right off the line. She said he was worse than any thief, worse than a house fire. She said she could probably go to any town in the Middle West and see some pair of pants she'd patched walking by in the street.

I believe he was a saint of some kind. When someone remarked in his hearing that he had lost an eye in the Civil War, he said, "I prefer to remember that I have kept one." My mother said it was good to know there was anything he could keep. He told me once he was wounded at Wilson's Creek, on the day of the death of General Lyon. "Now that," he said, "was a loss."

When he left us, we all felt his absence bitterly. But he did make things difficult. It was an innocence in him. He lacked patience for anything but the plainest interpretations of the starkest commandments. "To him who asks, give," in particular. (Gilead p 31).

This is the problem with a lot of people. They are so literal minded as to be no earthly good. But then, "Good news!" -- there ARE those rare individuals who, conversely, understand the unconventional, counter-intuitive, genius of Jesus. Dorothy Day, for instance.

When Dorothy was working at the Catholic Worker soup kitchen in New York decades ago, one day someone came in and gave Dorothy a diamond ring as a donation. All the staff and volunteers wondered what Dorothy would do with it.

Like Judas and the spikenard, they each calculated how much it might be worth, and then, what could be bought with it.

Dorothy thought about that diamond all morning, and then in one wild gesture she gave it to a woman who had been taking a meal a day at the soup kitchen for years.

Well, Dorothy's staff came unglued. "We could have bought enough rice and beans and bread to feed the people here for a month!" one of them said with great indignation.

In response Dorothy said one little thing: "Do you suppose God only made diamonds for the rich?"

I doubt that Mary had much of an idea of what she was doing with that ointment. She was following what she knew in her heart was absolutely right; what the moment cried out for.

Jesus, with his impeccable judgement knew, too, that it was a holy act; a gift a woman gives a man maybe once in a lifetime. It was something from God

And those who stand around watching either write them off as crazy or fall silent before something they don't understand. Maybe the confused ones DO sense that it is an act of courage that rings with holiness.

Barbara Brown Taylor has said that when Mary stood before Jesus with that pound of pure spikenard it could have gone either way.

Mary could have anointed his head and everyone could have proclaimed him king. But she didn't do that.

When she approached him she dropped to her knees and poured the balm on his feet, as if anointing a dead man. And to any who would object, Jesus' words were simply, "Let her alone."

There will be nothing prudent or economical about his life. Taylor says that, "[in Jesus] the extravagance of God is made flesh. In him the excessiveness of God's mercy is made manifest."

Last week I preached on the text about the prodigal son. You know, Jesus himself could be deemed *prodigal* – meaning literally, wasteful, but wasteful in a most wonderful way.

The flask will not be held back like some bottle of expensive rare vintage wine from the days of Napoleon which might have been bought as an investment.

No, it will be opened, offered, used up, and poured out for all. It will be emptied to the last drop. That is the way with the things of God.

But Life will come from it. Life will spin out of it and it will be beautiful, just as life will spin out of Jesus' deliberate death on the cross.

Of his giving up his life, Jesus, in this gospel says, "No one takes it from me, I give it up of my own accord." His actions are entirely deliberate.

And you know, the supreme fact about our lives is this: no life is rich unless it is poured out. The key, of course, is finding something worth pouring your life out for.

I love something Viktor Frankl, survivor of the holocaust, once said: "Live as if you were living a second life, and as though you had squandered the first."

Think about that for a moment. That's how Mary was living in the gospel story this morning. That's probably why she made the grand gesture she made with the jar of nard.

A few of you will remember the film, *The Straight Story*, with Richard Farnsworth, the preposterous story of the aged disabled man who has to surrender his car and driver's license and who travels through two states on his riding lawn mower in order to apologize to his long estranged brother – something he just has to do in order to die a peaceful death.

You know, it wasn't everyone's favorite movie. The film moved at about the pace of, well, a riding-lawn-mower. People who would line up around the block to get tickets to the latest *Batman* movie would sleep through it.

The whole premise seemed preposterous, unless you watch long enough to see all the credits and learn that it is based on the life of a man whose name actually was, Alvin Straight.

All that way, on a lawn mower, just to say you are sorry? Why couldn't he just phone home, like ET? But then, why couldn't the woman with the expensive jar of spikenard just say to Jesus she was sorry that he would soon be dead?

Explaining her action Jesus says, "she has done a *beautiful* thing for me." Something beautiful. So beautiful it will be remembered for as long as humans have memory. (*This is how it plays out in the other three gospels*).

The philosopher, Francis Bacon is remembered to have said something to the effect that in all beauty there is some strangeness of proportion. Think of it. Something out of sync; like eyes so large and so dark they don't quite fit the face they are set in – or a neck, so long and slender it somehow seems wrong, except for being so lovely.

The disciples would certainly argue that what they were suggesting about selling the nard and giving the money to the poor, they were suggesting out of love -- love for humanity. But for Jesus, what they thought of as love, wasn't love, exactly. I mean, *if it was love*, it was a *calculating* kind of love.

In what is called the Bible's "Love chapter," 1st Corinthians 13, the apostle Paul tells us about people who make grand gestures, giving away all that they have for narcissistic reasons. He also mentions people who give their bodies to be burned (as martyrs) but who are not motivated by love.

They do what they do to attract attention, or gain an eternal reward, or to make martyrs of themselves, but not for love, not like this woman whose cup overflows.

Her beautiful loving gesture is the Christian answer to all the right-wing fundamentalist martyrs of the last couple of decades. The ultimate religious sacrifice is NOT to become a suicide bomber. That is a counterfeit.

Will Smith was right when at the Oscars he said that "love makes you do crazy things" – but his compulsive violence was, sad to say, a counterfeit, too. It's good to see from his resignation from the Academy on Friday that he is beginning to understand that, too.

Mary's love seems, to the disciples, to be just so much foolishness in the face of a starving world. They can't understand it.

They have no way of knowing the timeliness of this woman's extravagant gift. She gives all she has, just as Jesus is on his way to give all he has, all he is – choosing once and for all, to NOT return evil for evil. To show us that it is, indeed, possible to behave that way.

We live four score years on this planet, and maybe a few more or less. What does it mean to have lived a full life? It means knowing who you are. It means knowing the times and the seasons and in that, knowing that certain moments in our lives come along and call for extraordinary things. It means asking yourself important questions – like, ARE diamonds ONLY for the rich?

It means wondering, maybe even out loud, whether there is more to life than making money. It means being there for another human being, as Mary was there for Jesus, when he needed someone to **not** run away when she saw a loneliness in his eyes like (maybe) no one ever showed another person before.

And if you have trouble grasping that, remember, the key may be this: Try living as if you were living a second life, and as though you had squandered the first.

Amen