

## “Letting Your Hair Down”

John 12:1-8, March 17, 2024

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A certain smell has power to grab your attention – and the power to evoke memories. Think of your favorite food roasting away in the oven at home on Christmas Day, and your mind drifts back into times of Christmases past, and of people you once knew. I remember once walking through a newly carpeted building and immediately the memory of my high school when it was brand new flooded my mind. That new carpet smelled just like high school, and that first day in a new classroom. Or your dog, fluffy and wet from a bath, jumps all over you, and you end up smelling just like the dog, but you don't care because the smell of your pooch is the smell of love, and it makes you love him more. Not all smells are pleasant, however. Think of the smell of death, and not only a body that is now a decomposing corpse, but all the smells associated with death, like a squeaky-clean funeral home or the scent of the guests, or the fragrance used inside of a mausoleum to mask the unpleasant smells that caskets can't always hide.

In today's story from the Gospel of John we read the story of the powerful fragrance of a perfume\*, but before we get there, let's remember where we have come so far in our Lenten journey. Jesus has traveled to Bethany because his friend Lazarus has died. Lazarus had been in the tomb four days. John wants us to know that this confrontation with death will not be pleasant. When Jesus asks that the stone in front of the tomb be rolled away, Martha, the sister of Lazarus, cautions him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” The King James translation of this text is blunt and very evocative, “Lord, by this time he stinketh ...” Undaunted, Jesus enters the tomb and commands, “Lazarus, come out.” And the text is clear about what happens, “The dead man came out.” The dead Lazarus lived again.

In that tomb, at that moment, the fragrance of life, hope, and new beginnings filled the air. The fragrance of life had overcome the stench of death. But no sooner is the stone rolled away, but it kind of snaps shut again. Death pervades the scene once more as those who fear the Gospel of Life that Jesus brings begin to plot his death. The cloying smell of death hangs over the drama once more, and they search for Jesus to kill him. But now we discover that Jesus has taken a retreat.

Jesus goes to Bethany on the outskirts of Jerusalem and specifically to the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus where they throw a dinner party to celebrate what Jesus has done to restore Lazarus to life.

Who's there at the dinner in Bethany? Maybe we can identify with them. There's Martha. The text is very sparse in what it says, but it's meaning is powerful. “Martha served ...” Remember in the Gospel of Luke Martha's scurrying around fixing all the trimmings for dinner while her sister Mary is all goggle-eyed at Jesus' teaching. Critical of Martha for her busyness, Jesus praised Mary that she had chosen the better part of sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to his stories and his wisdom. Here Martha is in John's gospel – busy again.

Don't overlook Martha, or people we know like her. She's the one who prepares meals, organizes receptions, changes diapers. She's the type who serves on property committees, sets up tables, maintaining an orderly environment for the rest of us. I don't know a church who could do without the Martha types. We should be grateful for them. As Martha did, they serve. Jesus said later in the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter, “Whoever serves me, the Father honors.” Martha occupies the place of an honored disciple.

And then there was Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Can you imagine what his friends were asking him, “Lazarus, what was it like to be dead? Did you see your parents on the other side? What did God look like? Did you remember to take a bath after you came back to life?” I am sure Lazarus had other thoughts, “What is this resurrection life about, what do I do with this gift that Jesus has given me?” Ponder that question for yourself. What does it mean for us to share in the life that Christ gives, a life that begins now and extends into eternity?

But at the center of the story is their sister, Mary, whose actions might contain part of the answer. After her brother Lazarus had died, she was the one who ran to Jesus, pleading and weeping at his feet, “Jesus, if you had been there my brother would not have died.” She doesn't hold back her emotions.

And so, we arrive at that important scene in the story. Visualize it with me. Our Puritan ancestors would have been scandalized by this moment. Overwhelmed with gratitude for what Jesus has done for her brother, she takes her scarf off, lets her hair down, and takes an outrageously expensive bottle of perfume, worth a year's wages, and pours it on Jesus' feet. And then with her hair she rubs the perfume into his feet. Luxurious, gooey oil. The text says, "The house was filled with the fragrance of perfume." It is so intimate, so sensuous, dare I say erotic. And so extreme too. I mean we love Jesus, right, but I am not going to run out there and wear my feelings on sleeve, and talk about him, right?

But there is someone in that room who has his nose up in the air, the only disciple to make a comment - Judas. He didn't like Mary's actions. Too daring. "Such a waste," he thinks. He says, "Why wasn't this expensive perfume sold and the proceeds given to the poor?" He sounds like a practical Presbyterian, doesn't he? So financially calculating and morally discerning. No drama, no spontaneity on his part. But John wants us to know that Judas' true motive is not financial propriety or concern for the poor - his motive is to line his pockets. No, don't let Judas be the voice to which we should listen. Judas is the smell of death who is trying to insert his agenda into the room.

Keep your focus on Mary now. She wipes Jesus' feet with her hair. That same word "wipe" is used later in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter when Jesus washes the feet of the disciples and "wipes" them. He uses foot washing as an example of the teaching he gives his disciples a few verses later: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

If I hear the story correctly, Mary didn't have to wait for Jesus to teach her that commandment. By her action of anointing and wiping Jesus' feet, she's already living it, expressing it, extravagantly, with abandonment. She has absorbed everything about Jesus through his ministry, and so she's loving the way Jesus wants his disciples to love before he even utters his new commandment. And she loves in the way Jesus is going to love. Jesus know that life is not meant to be saved, to be store up, but to be poured out for humankind. His death on the cross is the singular moment in which the extravagant love of God is poured out in death. A total giving of oneself without one regard for the cost. And Mary has prepared him for that self-offering. "Leave her alone," he says, "she is preparing me for my burial." She gets it. She understands Jesus and what discipleship is about. She knows love, and shares love, and stares death in the face with the abundance of love.

Let us leave Bethany now, and return to this room, to our celebration of God's amazing love here, our remembrance of his extravagance. What are we to do in the face of such a gift? What are we saving ourselves for?

We live in a world that reeks of death. It stalks us. It haunts us. It intrudes into our thoughts. We smell it in the disorder of our politics, the violence in our communities, in Gaza and Ukraine, in the ways that we are strangers to one another and from the people who are our neighbors. I see a world in which the stench of death is everywhere, but I don't think it will be force or violence or strong authoritarians that will repel that foul odor. More death will not cast out death; more violence will not end violence; saving ourselves will not create a just and peaceful world. It will be instead extravagant love that banishes death.

So what are we to do? We have a choice to make. We can be cautious as Judas, tight in spirit and in soul, offended at the extravagance of giving, or we can love as Mary loved, living with the knowledge that we are abundantly gifted to share that love. No one has ever called me reckless, or a wastrel. But God is always giving us the chance to be called such. Of all the sins I have committed, my greatest sin has been the withholding of love from people who needed to be loved. A kind word, a listening ear, an unhurried and focused attention to the needs of others would have sufficed, and certainly giving my resources would have helped. And I wish I could have been bolder and spoken the truth, but spoken the truth more in love, rather than in certainty. Look around this room, be in conversation with others, see your families as the beloved of God, and remember the poor always, the broken and vulnerable, in this world - they are crying out for love, not just any love, but your love. For they are, as Jesus says, *WITH* you.

We gather in this beautiful room today because of an amazing love that has redeemed us and the world and cast out death in the gift of Jesus Christ. We know that the stench of death is around and has the power to captivate us, but not in this place, not with the memory of Mary present. Not today. Today I can smell the fragrance of love here, and I detect the sweet smell of Easter and resurrection around the corner.

Blessing and glory and wisdom  
and thanksgiving and honor  
and power and might  
be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.'

\*The use of "fragrance" in the sermon was inspired by Gail R. O'Day's work, *The Word Disclosed: Preaching the Gospel of John*.