

Fifth Sunday in Lent
John 12:1-8; Isaiah 43:16-21
April 7, 2019
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Isaiah 43:16-21

16Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, 17who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: 18Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. 19I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. 20The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, 21the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

John 12:1-11

12Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 3Mary 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. 4But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” 6(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.) 7Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

Back in the Dark Ages, when I was a boy, whenever my brother or I caught a cold, we actually looked

forward to the treatment that would make us feel better. Before we went to bed, my mother would get out the Vicks-vaporub, remember that? And she would annoint our chests with it and our stuffed up noses would all of a sudden be clear. And I can still smell that Vicks odor even now. Smells, scents, odors have been linked in science very closely to memory. When we smell something that we have smelled before, it takes us back in time. I'm sure you have favorite smells, some of which take you back to a specific memory. Freshly baked bread, honeysuckle, the smell of recently cut wood in the workshop, coffee right after it has been ground, the citrus smell of an orange right after you peel it, the breeze right before it rains. My wife still has in her closet an odd sweater or a jacket that belonged to her mother. Sometimes when she picks one of those up she can still smell her mother's perfume. Now my mother-in-law Anne has been gone since 2011, but when Erin experiences that scent it is like she is here again for an instant.

“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.” It's not very often that the gospel writers talk about the sense of smell. They speak of what Jesus said, what the people heard. The speak of what they saw and occasionally things that they touched. But they don't often speak of smell. But there's something special about this instance. There is an herb that grows in the Hymalayas, in the area that is now Nepal and Bhutan and the area of Kashmir. The lower stems and roots are dried and used to make an ointment called nard. Because of its fragrance and because of where it comes from, in the ancient world it was a very rare and expensive perfume. Mary, the sister of Lazarus, has a whole pound of this expensive ointment and uses it to annoint the feet of Jesus. And the whole house was filled with its fragrance. That part of this passage has been in my mind all week, not only because of the rarity of the perfume or because of the scarcity of gospel verses that refer to smell. I've been thinking about it because even though references to odor are rare in the New Testament, this one occurs just a few verses after a previous one. You'll remember that Mary's brother Lazarus had become sick and so she and her sister Martha sent for Jesus. But he arrived too late, Lazarus was already dead. Chapter eleven in the

gospel of John is the account of what happens next. Mary and Martha both express their sadness but at the same time their continuing faith in Jesus. And then Jesus, even though he has been weeping, commands that the stone be rolled away from Lazarus' tomb. Those standing around begin to object. We can't do that, he's been dead four days already. If we roll the stone away and open his tomb, the smell will be too much. Smells can be pleasant or they can be repulsive, and if you have ever smelled a decaying body, it is repulsive. So in just a few verses here we have John telling us about a bad smell and about a good one.

Karoline Lewis says, "The simultaneous smells of life and death -- that's the hard part about this text. While we may want Mary's devotion to make the stench of death dissipate, that is not, unfortunately, the point. Death and life exist together."¹ We get them both. As much as we might want to look forward to Easter Sunday and celebrate the resurrection of Jesus while avoiding the pain and loss of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, it doesn't work that way. We don't get one without the other. The joy of Easter Sunday does not tell us that we won't have to face death because Jesus lives. We are not promised immortality—we don't just continue on as we are. The promise instead is of eternal life, of life after death, because he has been raised, so will we be raised to be with him.

When John talks about the sense of smell in these passages, he speaks of the smell of death, he reminds us of our mortality. And then he speaks of the smell of the perfume that Mary uses to anoint Jesus' feet. I wouldn't really call this smell the scent of life, but I would call it something else. When Mary uses the perfume to anoint Jesus, Judas is there to see what is happening and he objects. Why are you doing this? This is really expensive perfume. It could have been sold for a lot of money. I bet we could have gotten \$25,000 for it! Judas says 300 denarii, but in those days a denarius was about a day's wage for a laborer. What does a basic laborer earn in America today? If the minimum wage goes up to \$15, then it's a bit more than \$25,000. So if you were given \$25,000, what would you do with it? And you can't

1 Lewis, Karoline.

keep it for yourself. Would you help the poor? Or would you buy some really expensive perfume to put on Jesus' feet? That's what Mary does and Judas objects. Jesus responds by saying that "the poor will always be with you," and some people have taken that statement to say that it's pointless to try to help the poor, to throw money at them because we will always have poor people. The church has too often used these world to justify complacency. But Jesus was clearly not telling us to neglect the poor. His words are a quotation from Deuteronomy 15:11, "For the poor will never cease out of the land; therefore I command you, you shall open wide your hand to the needy and to the poor in the land." But \$25,000? I might object to that. That's not so strange, is it? This seems like a waste. It seems very spendthrift. It seems very prodigal. If you were here last week, we talked some about the prodigal son and how the word prodigal means wasteful. Well, isn't Mary the one here being prodigal, being wasteful. Of course she is, but I think she is an example to us of what God does for us. The smell that permeates the house that night is not the smell of life overpowering the smell of death from the previous chapter. The smell is the odor of extravagant love. Mary gives the best she has in love to Jesus. And then she wipes his feet with her hair.

We noted what happened in the previous chapter of John with the raising of Lazarus and that John speaks of the smell of death and now of the smell of the extravagance of love. We should also note what happens in the next chapter. Because only a few verses from now, Jesus sits down with the disciples to have his last meal with them before his arrest and crucifixion. But before they eat, Jesus has them sit down and he takes a basin of water and he washes their feet. Even Judas. And then he wipes their feet with a towel. And John uses the same word here, just a few verses later, that he used with Mary—she wiped his feet with her hair. Both actions are an outpouring of love, one after her brother's death and resuscitation, one before his own death and resurrection. It is love that conquers death. It is the extravagance of God's love for us that saves us, that raises us from death, that overcomes despair and hopelessness. I guess I think that is it God who is the real prodigal. It is God

who is going around spreading God's love willy-nilly to anyone who will receive it. It is God who is the farmer who throws his seed this way and that even into place that nothing should grow, just in case. It is God who loves so much that God becomes one of us, becomes human like us, that we might know and love him, even when we turn on him and shout, "Crucify him," God still loves us. It is God's love that is the extravagant gesture. And God is the example for us, to give extravagantly. Just like Mary did. To give to Jesus extravagantly. And as ethicist and theologian Stanley Hauerwas comments: "The poor that we always have with us is Jesus. It is to the poor that all extravagance is to be given."² When we are really being the church, we are giving of all we have, extravagantly-- to one another, to the poor, and to God. One of the best smells I can remember is when I arrive at church on Easter morning, early, about 5:00. And I come in those doors and the sanctuary is still dark, but as soon as I open the door, it hits me, the smell of all the flowers that you all have bought and that are decorating the church. It is the smell of Easter. It is the odor of resurrection. It is the scent of extravagant love, and it is love that overcomes death.