

Lent 5, Year C – April 3, 2022 John 12:1-8
Epiphany, Winnipeg
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(Just an important note about the very last thing Jesus says: “You always have the poor with you, but you don’t always have me.” When he says this he is not saying that there will always be poor people so don’t bother trying to change anything. Jesus is actually quoting the scripture he has been raised on – it’s in Deuteronomy, Chapter 15 - where Moses says, “Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth (“you’ll always have the poor with you...”) I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in the land.”” Everyone who hears Jesus say that will get the reference, and they’ll make the connection with their call, our call, to seek justice for the poor.)

Mary is walking into the room here, and she pours out three hundred denarii – that’s about a year’s wages – three hundred denarii worth of perfume right in the middle of this gathering. Some of us will sit and breathe it in, and it will be filled with beauty and it will take us to times and places where sweet perfume filled the most memorable airs of our lives. Some of us will find the smell a bit strange, because not everyone loves the smell of perfume, and some of us will have to leave because all that scent makes us gasp for breath and we just can’t stay. And maybe some of us will just find it annoying. Why would you do that, Mary?

We’ll see.

In that perfume that Mary pours you can smell the sweet aroma of gratitude. Mary and Martha and Lazarus are two sisters and a brother who live in a small town called Bethany. They’re hosting a dinner party at Lazarus’ house, and the guest of honour is Jesus. You see, in this story Lazarus has opened his home to

Jesus, but only a few days before all this Jesus had opened Lazarus' tomb. You might recall the story: Lazarus had died and been buried for four whole days, and his sisters and his friends and neighbours were gathered around the grave and grieving in the way that people grieve. Jesus showed up – Mary and Martha and Lazarus are his friends too – and after being scolded by Martha and Mary for showing up late and not doing what he could to keep Lazarus alive, Jesus shed his own tears for his friend. And then he simply said, “Lazarus, come out!” And Lazarus came out, and lived again.

We might think it's fabulous and make religious sense of it, but how do you make sense of that if you're Lazarus, or Martha, or Mary? Or anyone? Things like that just don't happen. Mary doesn't make sense of it; she just foolishly spends a year's wages on perfume, and when Jesus comes over for the dinner she pours out all that perfume, all that expense, all that effort, all that love, all that gratitude for what Jesus did for her brother...she pours it out on Jesus' feet as he reclines by the table. And the scent of Mary's gratitude fills the room. And why shouldn't it?

There's the scent of fear too.

When word got out about how Jesus had brought Lazarus back to life, people started to believe what they were hearing about Jesus. And when the brightest and best of the religious leaders heard that all these people were starting to believe all these stories they all got nervous. Their fear went something like this: If this keeps up everyone's going to believe in Jesus, and if that happens then the Romans are going to start to wonder what's up down there in Jerusalem, and they'll come in and crack down on us all because nobody wants anything weird

happening in their colonies. So the religious leaders decide that they need to get rid of Jesus, and they order anyone who knows where Jesus is to tell them so that they can have him arrested. For good measure, they start figuring out how to get rid of Lazarus too.

So Mary and Martha and Lazarus are having an illegal dinner for Jesus at Lazarus' house. They know where Jesus is, and they know what will happen if the wrong people find out. So you can feel the fear in the air, can't you? There's the fear that the authorities have felt, and they've turned that fear against the people. And there's the fear that all the guests at that dinner would feel, and you know that all that fear can put everyone on edge. But still, the dinner goes ahead. Maybe no one will find out. Then Mary pours out all this rich perfume, with all its expense and all its aroma that can't be contained in one room. Mary probably knows that the neighbours, and the authorities, will all find out. Bethany's a small town; everybody knows what the neighbours are doing in a small town.

There's a scent of sadness in that perfume too. Jesus and Mary both know that she is preparing his body for burial – it's an ancient custom in their world to anoint a body with oils and perfumes before it's buried. They know that Jesus will die soon. Maybe Jesus knows because he just knows what the timeline is for his one last trip to Jerusalem. And maybe Mary knows just because she sees the writing on the wall, and she's been around the block enough times to know that powerful people usually get what they want; if the authorities want to get their hands on Jesus, they'll get their hands on Jesus. So she knows she will grieve for her friend, and there's a hint of sadness in that perfume.

Mary walks into the room wherever we are today and pours out this sweet

perfume. Don't worry about what it costs, and if perfume doesn't work for you then imagine a rich aroma – food or a forest or sweetgrass or cedar, or a friend or a flower or leaves in the fall...find a beautiful scent. Mary walks into the room and pours that out so it fills the air.

The scent of the perfume carries so much gratitude; catch a whiff of that gratitude. Maybe it's gratitude for the food you had for breakfast this morning or for dinner last night. Maybe it's a deep thankfulness for the love of a friend, or your partner, or for fresh spring air. Maybe somehow you're saying thank you for the way you received an answer to a prayer. Someone is grateful today for shelter that they didn't have yesterday. Thousands and thousands of people, Indigenous and settler, are grateful for an apology spoken by Pope Francis. The scent of perfume fills the air, and it carries the scent of thanks.

The perfume that fills the air carries our fear with it too, you know. We all know that there's been fear in the air for a couple of years now; maybe we know now better than ever what it means when someone says "You could smell the fear." (Remember the first few times you walked into a grocery store after March 15, 2020?) And we know what that fear does. In some ways, it has put us all on edge. For some of us, the fear has made our tempers short and our anger strong, for some it's made our hope really thin. Fear has that effect when it sticks around for so long.

And if we've known fear like that, imagine the fear of someone today in Ukraine, or Yemen, or Ethiopia, or any number of places. Picture the fear of a child so many years ago being taken away to a residential school, or imagine the fear in a room in Bethany near Jerusalem, today or on an evening a few thousand years ago. Mary and Martha and Lazarus, and Jesus, and Judas, and everyone in

that room – they know fear too. And Mary’s perfume carries our fears, and maybe as it wafts around the room we sense somehow that we are not alone in the fears that we have. In some way it surrounds us all. Even if it can drive us apart we share it too.

And we know something about sadness and grief. What tugs at your heart? What have we lost – in these past few years or weeks? What have you lost? I know that I will grieve some day; the experts say that we’re all grieving these days, even if we can’t even see it. Those of us who have not grieved deeply know that we will some day. Mary knows it. Jesus knows it. And whatever sadness or grief we carry with us, we’re not alone with it either; it’s carried along in that perfume that Mary pours out to prepare her friend Jesus for what is to come.

But there’s something else that Jesus knows and gives us; and maybe Mary knows it too. It is simply that the sweet aroma of the love of Jesus, who walks with us in our gratitude and our fear and our sadness, our grief, our worry, our loving, our living...the sweet aroma of the love of Jesus will always fill the air.

Mary is generous with her gift, and that gift reminds us that Jesus is generous with the gift of love, and that God is always generous with the gift of life. As the perfume is shared in that room in Bethany, and as it’s shared in a chapel in Rome or in a sweatlodge back home. As it’s shared in the company of rubble in Kiev, or here among us in the rooms where we gather with our joys and sorrows, all the gratitude and love and sadness and fear of a weary world are handed over to Jesus, who will meet us outside of his own tomb one day with a life, a sweet aroma of new life, life that defeats death; life that is making everything new again.

AMEN.