

Sermon: Lent 5

Mr. Evans DeVries

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Year C

Isaiah 43:16-21

Psalm 126

Philippians 3:4b-14

John 12:1-8

When I think of Lent, I usually think of a somber time. A quiet time of reflection, not a time of partying. Luther Seminary's Matt Skinner agrees: "Extravagance, Pleasure, Effusiveness, Exuberance. These aren't ideas that we usually associate with Lent and the overture to Jesus's passion." None-the-less, today's gospel reading centers on a dinner party! To be fair, today's reading and the neighboring passages have a little something for everybody. We have intrigue, plots to kill Jesus, which ultimately will succeed, and a plot to murder Lazarus which is found three verses beyond the end of today's reading in John 12:11. We have no word on how successful that plan was, but Lazarus's being alive was a constant reminder of the Jesus's power and a constant threat to the religious powers that be, therefore, it marked Lazarus for death, too. (I must confess that I overlook this plot to murder Lazarus every Easter season in favor of the larger story line of Jesus's death.) Today's gospel also offers the story of the anointing of Jesus by Mary and Judas's criticism of that act. Like Judas, I think that, from an earthly perspective, the anointing of Jesus by Mary is extravagant and I agree with Judas's remarks on their face. In general, as found in John 21:15-17, I am a "feed my sheep" kind of guy. If one loves Jesus, one is called to care for His sheep, His lambs. Here, I find it difficult to see the larger role that the anointing plays. This week's reading also offers some echoes of last week's gospel reading of the story of the prodigal son, only this time it's Mary as a prodigal daughter "squandering" perfume worth a fortune. Then, there is the Christ's discussion of the poor which has been argued about and twisted for millennia. That discussion leaves us wondering what follows from the idea that the poor will always be with us? Since they will always be with us, does that mean that our efforts to help the poor are always doomed to failure? Does this knowledge free us from responsibility to help the poor? Finally, there is a hint of

eroticism in the wiping of Jesus's feet by Mary, using her hair. In everything that I have read, commentators are unanimous in the view that a proper Jewish woman would not unbind her hair in public and not in the presence of a man who was not her husband. These authors point to the shared cultural views of the Middle East that a woman's hair is her "glory", and they note that Orthodox Muslims still enforce the wearing of the hijab. As I said, this gospel passage has a little something everybody.

The focal point of the reading is when Mary takes a large quantity of very expensive perfume and anoints Christ's feet with it, wiping it with her hair. The question which comes up in almost every commentary is What was she thinking? In their culture, in this situation, there were three possible reasons that might explain why someone might be anointed. The first would be kingship, but Christ resisted that whole "King of the Jews" thing and Mary had no authority to do that, anyway. The second situation which could have called for anointing would have been if Jesus were ill, a tradition we continue to follow with our healing prayers and anointing for healing at communion, today. Jesus wasn't ill. Finally, the last reason which would have called for anointing in this situation would be anointing a dead person for burial. No one at that time, other than Jesus, knew that His hour had come. So why Mary chose to pour out the perfume on Jesus's feet is a behavioral mystery. Further, no one seems to know how Mary got the perfume in the first place. Some suggested that it was part of Mary's dowry, purchased by relatives as an investment. Perfume was small and easy to store/hide and it was readily resalable. One commentator suggested that it might have been purchased to use on the corpse of Lazarus, the week before, but since he was buried for four days before Jesus called him out of his tomb, that doesn't seem likely. It would have already been used. Regardless of the origin of the perfume, Mary's behavior was prophetic, according to Susan Hulen of Georgia's Emory University. John, later in the recounting of the trial scenes, continually points to Jesus's kingship and so, because of the literary context, Mary's actions anticipate and enact the notion that Jesus is king.

Judas's criticism of Mary's anointing Jesus and Christ's response is interesting, too. We are told by John that Judas suggested that more good could be achieved by selling the perfume and giving the money to the poor than by dumping the fragrance on Jesus. We are also told that Judas said this to try to be in a position to steal at least some of the money. Judas is told to leave Mary alone, that it was necessary for her to keep the nard for the day of Jesus's burial. Scott Hoezee points out that the response is very difficult to translate from the original and to make sense of once it is translated. The problems with the statement are that it was not the day of Christ's burial, which was six days away, and she couldn't keep the perfume until then because she had already poured it on His feet.

Finally, what are we to make of the statement that the poor we will have with us always? As I mentioned at the onset, this passage has been debated and twisted for centuries. This may be about priorities, as in, you will have ample opportunities to help the poor when I am gone, which will be soon. The full verse 8 (NRSV) is: "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." It may be more of a strategy to help the poor. By keeping them around you are able to best determine their needs.

Lastly, I look at Mary's actions from my personal level. Only a few days before, Jesus had restored a beloved family member to life. I know how I would feel if one of my loved ones died and had been brought back. I might offer the most precious thing that I own in an vain attempt to show my gratitude. What Jesus has done for me, for my loved ones, for all of us is purchase eternal life through His pain and suffering, death and resurrection. All this makes it clear to me that I can never be grateful enough.