

Anointed

Preached FCCW, April 7, 2019

John 12:1-8

In the town of Bethany in Judea there was a party going on. You could say that it was a welcome home party, but what an understatement that would be! I dare say that there has never been a homecoming to compare with what was being celebrated that evening.

Lazarus sat at the dinner table. He had returned from a unique journey. Not from a trip to some far-off land, but from a four-day sojourn within a sealed tomb. Lazarus, you see, had been raised from the dead.

As remarkable as it was for him to be present among the living though, he was not even the guest of honor at this party. His presence was overshadowed by another that night. Jesus, who had been the one who had brought him back to life. It was for him that they were celebrating.

The last time Jesus had passed through Bethany it had been to attend Lazarus's funeral. When he got there, Lazarus had been dead for four days. Jesus commanded some of the mourners to roll the stone away from the entrance to the tomb. Then he prayed to Heaven, shouted into that dark hole in the rock, "Lazarus! Come out!" and waited... for the impossible to happen.

Now, there was Lazarus sitting at the table with him and his disciples. Yes, this was a welcome back party. What almost nobody realized was, that it was also a farewell party. In fact, the Greek word that John uses for this dinner will be used only one other place in his gospel. That will be for Jesus's last dinner with his disciples on the night before his

death. What we will commemorate this morning in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

For all the joy of this evening among friends there was also a sense of destiny and inevitability. Bethany was only 2 miles from Jerusalem. Close enough that the walls of that great city could almost cast their shadows over the house where Jesus and his friends ate this night. Jesus alone knew that a final farewell waited only 6 days and 2 miles from the doorstep of the house where they dined together.

You see not everyone who saw Jesus raise Lazarus from the grave or who heard about it from eye witnesses thought that it was grounds for a celebration. Those people who were already troubled by Jesus's ministry and who were growing increasingly concerned about his spreading popularity were more desperate now than ever. How could they stem the tide of believers rushing to follow Jesus when *this* news got around? If *they* did not do something to put an end to this, surely the Romans would, and everybody would end up suffering. Better that one man died than many innocent people. So, they made up their minds to find a way to eliminate Jesus and Lazarus who was living, breathing testimony to Jesus's power and the authenticity of his ministry.

Jesus had warned the disciples before about how this all would end, but they could not or would not believe him. One person however did seem to have a foreshadowing of what was going to happen. Mary the sister of Lazarus and Martha. Mary brings a pound of expensive perfume to the dinner, and anoints Jesus's feet. Most likely a few drops would have sufficed. But she doesn't stop until the whole jar is empty and the whole house is filled with its fragrance.

Judas Iscariot watches all this with undisguised disdain. He accuses Mary of wasting that valuable perfume that was worth a year's wages, when it could have been sold to benefit the poor. John inserts a parenthetical bit of hindsight about Judas' ulterior motives. But it was still several days before Judas would reveal his true colors. And he did seem to have a point. Maybe some of the other disciples took his side, nodding and murmuring their disapproval of Mary's act.

But Jesus defends Mary. "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor with you but you do not always have me."

Jesus's words suggest that Mary had a better understanding than the others that for Jesus this was as much a going-away party as it was a welcome back celebration. Perhaps she had listened better to what Jesus had been saying. Maybe she had heard rumors in the marketplace about plans for his arrest. Whatever it was, what separated Mary from the other disciples was that Mary *got it*. She got that Jesus was going to die.

The disciples hadn't really grasped that yet, even though Jesus had told them over and over. There would always be an obligation to help the poor. But right now, was the time for the disciples to finally understand what Jesus was about to do for them. There wouldn't be many more opportunities.

Knowing that his life was going to be poured out for her sake, Mary poured out all she had for him. That is the difference between Mary's frivolous use of the jar of perfume for Jesus's feet and Judas' calculated estimation of its use to help the poor or to line his own pockets. Mary recognized that what she had received from Jesus in the return to life of her brother Lazarus, and what everyone would

receive in the life Jesus would give for us all, was something priceless. She didn't measure it in denarii as Judas did.

2000 years later, we do still have the poor with us. It is in the poor that we can still find Jesus and in working to liberate them from poverty through charity and justice, we can express our love for him. But unless we are transformed by the depth of his sacrificial love for *us*; to pour ourselves into the tasks of discipleship, as fervently as Mary emptied every last drop of that jar of nard –until then-- the poor *will* always be with us.

May that love which was poured upon Jesus's feet be the love that we find renewed in our lives today. And being renewed by love let us go into a world of hurt and suffering and anoint it all. Each person. Every place of pain and death. Every act of hatred and violence. All the things that exclude and divide and impoverish. Let us anoint them in the inexhaustible love of Christ.

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