

Lent 5 C Sermon
John 12:1-8
April 3, 2022

The Untamable Heart
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Six 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 [Martha and Lazarus' sister,] 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 said, ⁵"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" 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."

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After reading this text from John's gospel I couldn't bring myself to interject a joke or a funny story. We are meant to experience this story, as Jesus did, looking into the eyes of one who loves us with every ounce of her being and knows what the days ahead will bring, while sharp-scented perfume is drying on our feet; or as the onlookers did, with the smell of that perfume stinging our noses and the sight of an impassioned, albeit wasteful, Mediterranean woman tenderly wiping the teacher's man-feet with her unbound hair; or as Mary did, hopelessly, helplessly loving a man who had willingly walked into danger to raise our brother from the tomb, a man who knows us—not as a single women in the household of our brother, but as a disciple, a minister, a friend, a man into whose face we may not look again until we see it battered and beaten and drooped over his heaving chest as he clings to life on a rough-hewn cross.

This is a raw, emotional, and deeply moving story and it is not meant to be tamed, dressed-up, or explained away. It is meant to be experienced.

Are you uncomfortable? We should be. Several features of John's story about Mary's anointing of Jesus are meant to make us very uncomfortable indeed.

Firstly, the intimate act of a woman anointing Jesus in this manner is in and of itself an uncomfortable one. Many times, throughout scripture, Jesus is referred to as Messiah. Messiah is a Hebrew worded that means anointed. In this story, Lazarus and Martha's sister Mary, literally anointed "The Anointed." "Whereas throughout much of Western history the pope (a male) anointed and crowned the king (another male) or vice-versa, here Jesus is anointed by a woman from the countryside, from the working class, from the laity."² This is a dramatic role reversal, especially in the male-dominated society of Jesus' day, and our own.

In this story Mary broaches a significant cultural taboo—she touches a man and she does so with her hands and with her hair, a part of her body perceived as being overtly sensual. But, "For Jesus, women are more than sexual objects and children-rearing machines. That's why Jesus does not have a problem with being touched by women, seeing them with their hair down, with women talking to men or being active with their bodies and alive in their senses. In short, in the [realm of heaven] women are equal at the intellectual level, at the salary level, and at all levels."¹

Secondly, the apparent wastefulness of Mary's gesture—in a culture devoid of any kind of social safety net, and with a gap between the rich and the poor even greater than the one we experience in 21st century America—the apparent wastefulness of Mary's gesture makes us uncomfortable. Worth the price of a year's wages, Mary pours the liquid gold on Jesus' feet. Judas' takes note and comments that the perfume would have better served humanity if it had been sold and the money given away.

² Eliseo Pérez-Álvarez. "Commentary on John 12:1-8," Workingpreacher.org, March 13, 2016, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-john-121-8-3>.

Thirdly, Jesus' rejoinder that "You will always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me," makes us uncomfortable. Far from being okay with this fact, as a cursory reading of the text might suggest, Jesus, champion of the poor, is not advising his hearers to be resigned to the reality of poverty, rather, aware of his imminent death, he is saying that what you would do for someone, for the poor, for him, do like Mary, today and don't wait, because tomorrow is not guaranteed.

Finally, I think the very fact that this story is meant to be experienced is uncomfortable to many because it "stands in contrast to the idea of many Christians today that what matters most is belief in Jesus [and not experiences of Jesus] -- and by belief we mean conscious, doctrinal understanding of Jesus. Mary's faithful action is different. [The story] does not tell us what she believes, and it seems beyond human comprehension that she could understand all that will happen to Jesus, and all that her actions evoke. Yet we see her enact a faith that resonates deeply with what we know of Jesus' [purpose] and his death."²

This story, like the good news itself, is not meant just to be read, or heard, or even told. It is meant to be experienced. The sensuality and tenderness, the apparent wastefulness, and the urgent timeliness of this story are all meant to be experienced. No cursory reading can communicate what we can only hope to feel. And that is why this is such a powerful and uncomfortable story.

In this episode, Mary gets to the very untamable heart of Jesus' gospel, of his message of good news for the world. The gospel of Jesus is not, as so commonly posited in our culture, "believe and be saved." Instead, she shows us that it is "experience and have new life." The good news of Jesus, like this story, is only good if it can be experienced: if those poor have an equitable share, if women and enslaved peoples are freed to

² Susan Hylen. "Commentary on John 12:1-8," Workingpreacher.org, March 17, 2013, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-john-121-8-2>.

exercise their god-given gifts in the world, if those on the margins of society are welcomed into community, if the outcast becomes the friend.

The gospel of Jesus isn't good news at all if it is only to be heard or seen and believed. All the right beliefs in the world don't feed the hungry, liberate the captive, or include the excluded. The gospel of Jesus is good news precisely because of its power to overturn the belief systems and societal structures that keep people in bondage; it's power to tear down the idols of injustice, intolerance, and inhumanity and remake our world. The gospel of Jesus is meant to be experienced. *That* is what makes it powerful. Not because it is able to be believed, but because it is able to be experienced.

In what ways do we at New England Congregational Church need to *experience* the gospel today? How about our community? Our world?

When Jesus called the first disciples, he didn't stop to ask them first if they believed in the inerrancy of scripture, or the virgin birth, or the sacrificial atonement of the cross, or his own bodily resurrection, or his second coming. He said simply, "come, follow me."

That is the invitation to us this day and every day. Follow, see, hear, taste, touch, feed, clothe, liberate, welcome...EXPERIENCE. That is the heart of the gospel and that is very good news indeed. Amen.