

Lent 5C
John 12:1-8
April 6, 2025

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

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Today's reading begins with the first verse of the 12th chapter of John's gospel, but that's not actually where the story starts. For the beginning, you have to go back a chapter. In the 11th chapter, we learn that a man named Lazarus, brother of a certain Mary and Martha, had fallen ill. The sisters hoped Jesus would come to Bethany and heal their brother before it was too late. But he didn't. He waited for two days until he was sure that Lazarus was dead. Then, despite the protestations of the disciples, he headed to Bethany.

When they arrived, Martha delivered the news that her brother had indeed died. Jesus wept – one of only a handful of times when the gospels record

Jesus showing emotion. Mary joined Jesus and Martha and they went to the tomb. Jesus demanded that the stone be rolled away from the opening and then he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” And you know what? He did! Then Jesus and the disciples left and went a few miles out into the country. If I’m honest, though, that wasn’t really the beginning of the story either.

The Gospel According to Luke reveals that Jesus and the disciples had been to their home before. Martha welcomed him in and went about her work preparing food for their guests, while Mary sat and listened to Jesus teach. After scolding her sister for not helping, Martha got an unexpected chiding of her own from Jesus. Who knows, perhaps the beginning of the story lies even further back. Regardless, it’s abundantly clear that Mary, Martha, and Lazarus had become Jesus’ friends. On his way to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, it was only natural that he should want to stop about two miles outside the city to see them in Bethany.

It is the fifth Sunday in the season of Lent. We know that despite this brief layover in Bethany, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. And we know what will happen when he gets there. While Mary’s anointing of Jesus’ feet is interpreted by him to foreshadow his death and anointing for burial, she couldn’t have known what was about to happen, could she? Certainly, Jesus’ disciples knew that the authorities were plotting and they had regularly discouraged him from going to Jerusalem, the seat of their power. Maybe Mary too understood the danger he was in.

Either way, I can’t think of another time in scripture when, like the perfume, Jesus was given a gift. I take that back – gold, frankincense, and myrrh – but I can’t think of another time in his *adult* life that Jesus was given a gift by anyone. He’s usually the one doing the gifting: healing, wholeness, bread, fish, wine, wisdom, friendship, community, love. When did anyone ever give him anything? For Mary in that moment, her gift of perfume is what ministering to Jesus looked like. This is what loving Jesus looked like. It was a gesture unlike any other. And it was beautiful.

I don't know about you, but I hear a lot of people tell me they love God. We hear a lot of people thank God after professional sports games or during award shows. And God is often invoked by public figures and politicians. But Mary invites us to consider what loving actually looks like, feels like, smells like. It looks like an ordinary woman pouring out a gift of expensive perfume on the feet of her beloved teacher and washing them with her hair.

With Mary as guide consider, what does it look like for us to love God? To worship God? To serve God? Love in its purest form is seen in service. And how do we serve God? We serve God by serving others. To love God *is* to serve others. And Mary shows us how: humbly, sincerely, freely, extravagantly. This is what love looks like.

Of course, Judas criticized her, saying her outpouring of love was a waste. But is it really love if it's not costly? Writing some 800 years ago, mystic Mechthild of Magdeburg wrote that "Jesus went out seeking lost sheep, till he died of loving."¹ Love can be costly. Mary knew this. And Jesus did too.

In a statement uttered with what I can only imagine was double regret, Jesus concluded, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." Is that, I wonder, because he knew that the high price of loving God by serving others as he did would only ever be willingly paid by the few and the far between, ensuring that there really will always be those poor among us?

Another 13th century mystic, Marguerite Porete, stretches us to see God in all others. She writes: "there is no-one except God, and therefore I find no-one except God, wherever I enter."² All people are the face of God. Love of God is lived in humble, sincere, freely-given, extravagant service to others. Marguerite too loved all the way to the stake where she was burned. Love is costly and it isn't easy.

¹ Mechthild of Magdeburg. *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 6:1.

² Marguerite Porete. *Mirror of Divine Love*, Chapter 70.

Recently, someone admitted that they know that as a Christian we're called to love all others. They went on to say that they are finding that difficult right now. I don't have to go too far out on a limb to guess that most of us have struggled with that at one point or another. The Christian call to love our neighbors – *all* our neighbors – is not easy and the struggle is real. There are days when we just simply won't be able to do it. And there are days when we will remember with Marguerite that all people are the face of God, even if they don't show it, or act like it, or even know it. The struggle is real, so let's struggle well. With Mary, let's show the world what love looks like, and feels like, and smells like. And let's do it with all the humility, sincerity, willingness and extravagance we can muster. May it be so. Amen.