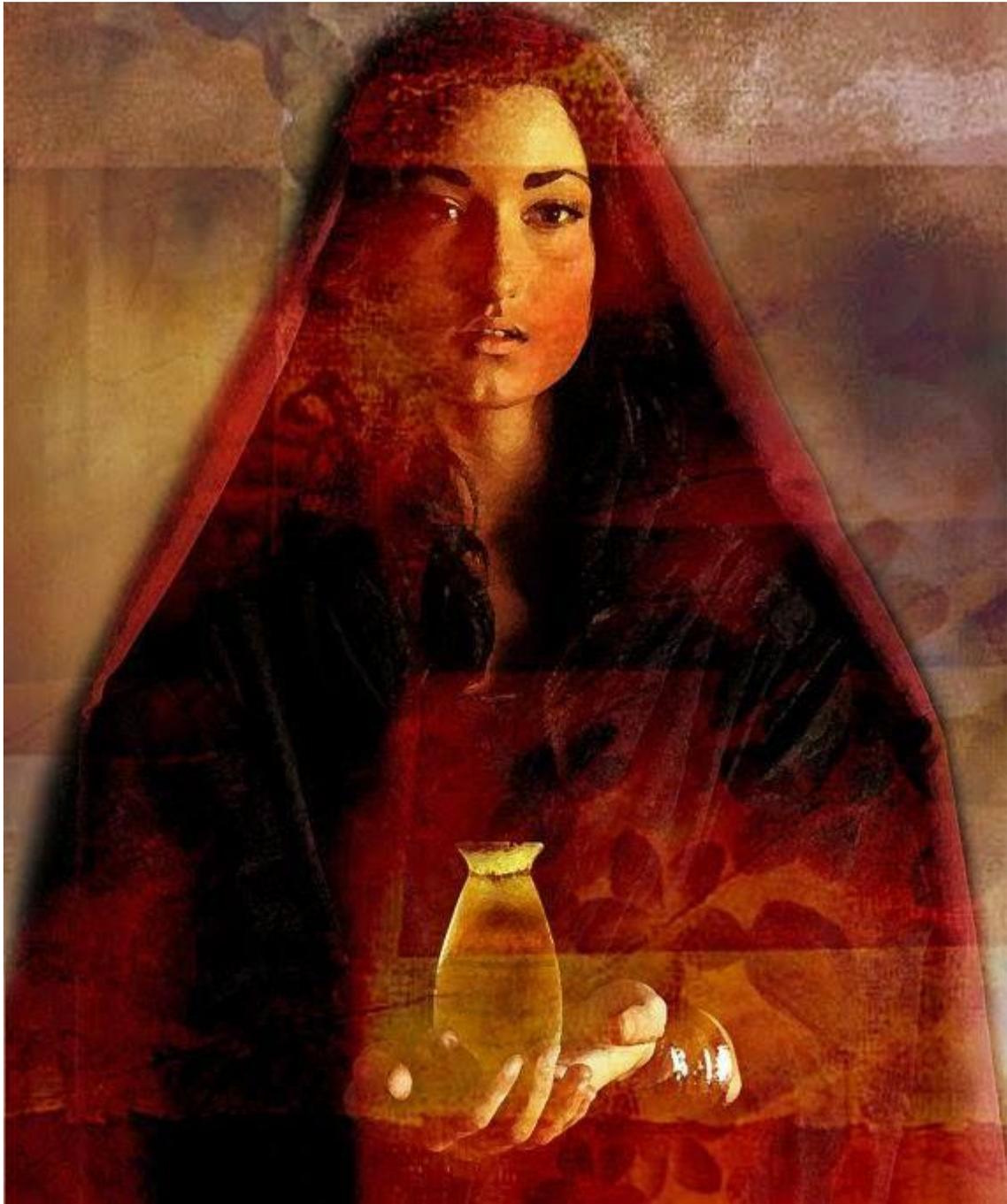


**St. George's Cathedral Kingston, Ontario
Sermon April 7, 2019, 5th Sunday of Lent.
St. John 12: 1-8
Eric Friesen**

A LOVE COSTING EVERYTHING



What an extraordinary gospel passage this is for the 5th Sunday of Lent. In his final weeks on this earth, Jesus visits the home of Lazarus, whom he had earlier raised from the dead. At dinner, Lazarus' sister Mary takes a pound, a POUND of costly perfume, washes Jesus feet with it and then dries his wet and glistening perfumed feet with her hair. The scent fills the house.

Some translations have it as a PINT of costly perfume oil. Imagine a pint or a pound of Chanel #5, of Calvin Klein's Eternity. Perfume, not eau de toilette. Not a dab on the wrist or a slight spray to the face. But poured out, liberally, every drop, in a single gesture. Imagine the sheer overwhelming extravagance of it.

A memorable line from a poem by Rudyard Kipling: "Smells are surer than sights or sounds to make your heartstrings crack." Every purveyor of luxury goods knows this truth. Which is why even in our scent-free age, department stores from the Bay to Holt Renfrew have their perfume counters right at the first floor entrance, ready to stimulate your sense of smell with the heady promise of romance.

And **you** know this truth. We experience life so richly through our sense of smell, especially in our memories. I was thinking this week of my first grade teacher at Elmwood School in Altona, Manitoba. Miss Hamm was her name. I don't remember what she looked like, or anything she said. What I remember about her as if it were yesterday is the swoosh of perfume scent as she walked into the room. How exotic in that small prairie town, how worldly, how romantic even for a 5-year old. Smells can make your heartstrings crack.

And then after Mary has washed Jesus feet with this costly fragrance - she dries his feet WITH HER HAIR, (as I imagine it) her long luxurious hair. Lovingly. Slowly. The utter sensuousness of it, the romance of it, even I would say the erotic nature of it.

Never was there a foot-washing like this, except perhaps in some decadent Fellini movie. And yet here it is, in John's Gospel, in Jesus' last days. Not long before Gethsemane, not long before the Cross, here it is in the middle of Lent this scene of extravagant go-for-broke love.

And where does the counter-voice come from? Where does the scolding come from, the shocking scold of the Puritan, the voice aghast at all this waste? Not from Jesus. Not from brother Lazarus. Not from the disciples closest to Jesus, at least not in John's account. It comes from the disciples treasurer - Judas Iscariot - who's been skimming the take from Jesus' fundraising. Judas Iscariot, probably annoyed that he cannot skim this gift, and who says the perfume should have been sold and the money given to the poor. The counter-voice in John's Gospel to this picture of Mary's extravagance, of love, of devotion, is the voice of the hypocrite, the thief, and the betrayer.

What ARE we to make of this passage here on this 5th Sunday of Lent? We don't usually think of extravagance, exuberance, physical pleasure, as moods of Lent. Lent, a time of giving things up, of fasting, of sombre holy reflection, How does this story of the dinner at Lazarus house fit in with that?

Most of the commentaries I've read about this story in John's Gospel seem to be wary of the wild, extravagant love of this Mary of Bethany for Jesus. They ignore it, or come up with all kinds of theological insights, which deflect us from the powerful intimacy of the story. It's as if they're embarrassed by it, or don't want to follow the story to its logical or imaginative conclusion. They seem to be missing the point.

On the front cover of your bulletin this morning is an illustration of Mary carrying her alabaster perfume bottle, approaching Jesus, about to wash his feet. Many of the classical paintings about this foot washing - and there are many - are not as sensuous as the story suggests, more pious, more chaste. So I chose this one - a more contemporary imagining by an unknown artist that gets us a little closer to what I understand is the truth of this story, a portrait of a woman in love, vulnerable, nervous for what she is about to do, utterly devoted, beautiful, perhaps even sensing the devastating end that is coming

I think it's fair to suggest that there is an expression of true love on Mary's part here. Yes, it could just be the devotion of a disciple smitten with the charisma of Jesus. But consider this: Matthew Marino, who is an Episcopal Priest at the Church of St John the Divine in Houston, TX., writes "In a culture where a woman's touch was forbidden, for Mary to cradle Jesus' feet in her hands and brush [perfume] oil over his ankles and toes with the ends of her [unbound] hair was unthinkable." So Mary was breaking the rules, breaking social convention, doing the unthinkable. Throwing caution to the wind. Taking a whole jar of precious perfume that cost a year's wages for a

manual labourer. And using it all in this one gesture. What would motivate her to do that, if not for love? Could anyone there have missed the tender intimacy of the moment? Can we? Imagine you were having your feet washed here on Maundy Thursday? Imagine a woman priest or bishop is washing your feet and then she dries them with her hair? Shocking even now to think about it. Even in our sexually explicit age.

It must have shocked those around her at that dinner, not just Judas. But not Jesus. Of course Jesus must of been on to Judas, knowing he was stealing from the disciples modest funds, perhaps even already suspecting it would be Judas that would betray him. But Jesus responds to him as would have to anyone who was upset by the extravagance and perhaps flagrant public display of love for himself there at that dinner table. "Leave her alone. She bought it so she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

It is an answer for the ages of course, and so also for us. Jesus isn't saying we should avoid caring for the poor, or that the poor aren't important. They will always be there needing to be cared for. But this is a powerful teaching moment for his disciples. Again Jesus is reminding them that he is not long for this world, that the forces of darkness, of betrayal, of jealousy, of political opposition, are gathering around him. His end is near. Why shouldn't he be given this gift of costly perfume before he dies? Mary, in her love and devotion, is anointing the body of a man she deeply loves, but who is doomed. She is anointing the body of "a dead man walking ."

What are we to make of this story in the heart of Lent?

A couple of years ago on NPR I was listening to an interview with the American writer Annie Dillard, whose work I love. Her most recent collection of writing is called “The Abundance.” When asked where the title came from, she quotes the Koran, and the quote is in keeping with the theme of today’s Gospel: *They will question thee concerning what they should expend. Say “The Abundance. What should you spend? Spend it all. Don’t save something good for a later place. Don’t try to keep anything for yourself because it will turn to ashes. If you spend it, it will fill up from behind, as it were, like a well. Empty it, You’ll be okay*

Most importantly in today’s Gospel reading, Jesus legitimizes, accepts, encourages wildness and extravagance in the cause of our relationship with him. What Judas says is not just the viewpoint of a thief and a betrayer. It’s the viewpoint of many who are unyielding in their piety and who cannot stomach a wild love like Mary’s. Who are always practical, sensible and who always follow social rules. Who are offended by extravagance of any kind.

Jesus is affirming that it is costly to love him, that in fact it costs everything. Real worship is costly. To worship is to give something worthy. The Lutheran theologian Matt Skinner points up the contrast between Mary and Judas: she represents lavish devotion, Judas - critical stinginess. This passage gives us permission to honor Our Lord in extravagant ways. For each of us that extravagance would be different, depending on our means and on our talents. Which is why I’m not here to tell you what you should give. But I am here to ask the question: What is it in you to give that would

really scare you by its risk, its extravagance? What is the everything that you could give? I turn the question back on myself. What is the everything that I could give? It IS scary. Real worship is costly.

Our Gospel lesson, again in theologian Matt Skinner's words, warns us against mistaking discipline for discipleship. It celebrates affection or love as part of a devotion to Jesus that is nothing less than the costly, precious gift of our whole selves - down to every last strand of hair.

Amen.

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