

Six days before Passover, Jesus entered Bethan where Lazarus, so recently raised from the dead, was living. Lazarus and his sisters invited Jesus to dinner at their home. Martha served. Lazarus was one of those sitting at the table with them. Mary came in with a jar of very expensive aromatic oils, anointed and massaged Jesus' feet, and then wiped them with her hair. The fragrance of the oils filled the house.

Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus' disciples, even then getting ready to betray Him, said, "Why wasn't this oil sold and the money given to the poor? It would have easily bought three hundred silver pieces." He said this not because he cared two cents about the poor but because he was a thief. He was in charge of their common funds, but also embezzled them. Jesus said, "Let her alone. She's anticipating and honoring the day of My burial. You always have the poor with you. You don't always have Me."

These last two week's gospel lessons are about extravagance, and within these stories we see the extravagant love of God. This is the fifth Sunday of Lent and the last Sunday before Holy Week begins. During these 40 days of Lent the church invites us to empty ourselves... to empty what we would fill ourselves with, stuff ourselves with, distract ourselves with... all that allows us to pretend that we are immortal, invincible, and only human. We fast from these things - and from certain pleasures - during the 40 days of Lent because Jesus fasted in the wilderness for 40 days, and these 40 days are an opportunity to walk with Him and learn from Him.

During His 40 days in the wilderness Jesus was tempted by the devil to lay down His humanity and use His divinity to defend Himself against it. During Lent we voluntarily enter the wilderness, and we lay down our illusions of divinity and acknowledge our humanity with all its vulnerability and frailty. During Lent we empty ourselves of the lies the devil would tempt us with: that we are in control, and that wealth and success and beauty are the real prizes of life.

Christians believe that Jesus was fully human and fully divine but that in order to be Emmanuel, God-with-us, Jesus lay down His divinity and became as powerless as

we are. The 40 days of Lent are an opportunity for us to learn and use the weapons Jesus used to resist the devil during His 40 days in the wilderness: trust in God, understanding of Himself as God's beloved, and knowledge of God's word.

In Lent we empty ourselves - again as Jesus did in His 40 days - in order to be filled with the presence of God. Some of us have observed Lent this year with a strong yearning to be filled with God. Today on this fifth Sunday, when we are so near the sorrows of Holy Week, we pause again to be refreshed by God's Word. We hear again of God's extravagant love for us through the story of Mary and Jesus.

Jesus (who said about Himself that He had no place to lay His head) was given the gifts of home and friendship with these three siblings, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. This is a sensuous story from John's gospel; somewhat like melting chocolate pooling on top of a cake and dripping down the sides... a silky-smooth and mouth-wateringly aromatic story. We can imagine Jesus at dinner with His friends, and how the smell of the oil Mary broke open filled the room, and then Mary massaging Jesus' feet and wiping them with her hair.... it's such an act of love and intimacy. The picture in last Wednesday's Eblast of Mary's face and hair touching Jesus' feet says more than my words can convey.

There will be enough said about Judas next Sunday and during Holy Week so I don't want to give him any time today. Today's gospel lesson is really about extravagant gestures of love, about being able to receive instead of give, and about recognizing the gift of the moment.

In Matthew and Mark's gospels it's an unnamed woman who anoints Jesus' head with oil, as kings were anointed. In Luke's gospel it's a sinful woman who anoints Jesus

while the Pharisees look on, offended. But in John's gospel it's Jesus' friend, Mary; His disciple, the one who sits at His feet and listens to Him and studies with Him, who anoints His feet. Jesus had another meal at the home of these friends, where Mary sat with the men while Jesus taught them, and while her sister, Martha, did the work expected of women, cooking, cleaning, and serving. Most often we associate Mary and Martha together - the embodiment of contemplation and action - but this story is Mary's alone... Mary's and Jesus'.

Mary anointed Jesus' feet, instead of His head, which mirrors Jesus washing His disciples' feet. I wonder if Mary was one of those disciples who had her feet washed by Jesus. Jesus, wrapped in a towel and kneeling to wash His disciples' feet modeled an extravagant act of love and humility and service, and some of them had a hard time receiving it. Mary's anointing was an extravagant gesture of love, and Jesus saw it for what it was, and received it. Some bible translations say that this pound of costly perfume Mary used to anoint Jesus' feet was made of pure nard, and cost about a year's worth of wages. This wasn't olive oil Mary and Martha had in the kitchen. This was an unimaginably extravagant gift... maybe something Mary was saving for her wedding or for her sister's wedding. Instead Mary used it to massage Jesus' feet, to anoint Him as kings were anointed... but as a different kind of king. Jesus modeled a different kind of kingship of love and mercy and service. Those in power who ruled with force and fear felt threatened by King Jesus.

Last week's gospel lesson was of the prodigal son... it was a story Jesus' told that defied the expectations of His listeners and it really goes against what we believe about crime and punishment. Instead of the father of the prodigal treating both of his

ridiculously disrespectful sons with the condemnation they deserved, he showed them abundant, extravagant love and mercy. (Who is the father in the story of the prodigal? It is God.) In today's gospel lesson Mary shows Jesus her love through the extravagant gifts of expensive anointing oil and tender touch. (Who is the extravagant oil poured out so generously and sacrificially in this story? It is Jesus Christ.) In both of these stories we are meant to see the outrageously and undeservedly extravagant love God has for us.

It might be too much to take in.... we don't deserve it. We know ourselves to be broken, wayward, stubborn, unloving, unkind... we know ourselves to be sinners. And yet God knows us (better than we know ourselves) and loves us. So like Jesus accepting the generous and sensuous gift of Mary's anointing oil on His feet, we need to accept God's love for us. It's God's pure gift to us. To accept the undeserved and extravagant love God has for us means that we give it away in acts of undeserved kindness, generosity, and love. To be loved by God and not give that love away is like leaving an uncorked bottle of wildly expensive anointing oil sitting on the pantry shelf in our hearts. It's there but kind of good for... nothing. One of the lessons from the past two week's scripture in this season of Lent is to love and forgive and serve... extravagantly.

Jesus received Mary's gift. Either we all had it drilled into us that "it's more blessed to give than receive" or it's part of our DNA to want to be the givers and not the receivers. Somehow to be a receiver is to be weak and needy, but Jesus was neither of those. He allowed Mary to give to Him, to serve Him, and to express her love for Him. I imagine Jesus giving and receiving love as if it could pass through Him without getting

snagged on anything false or self-conscious. That's our goal... what we're working towards... receiving love as effortlessly as Jesus did.

This isn't the final lesson of this scripture... but it's all I can pull out of this scripture in this week when the time has changed. The time changed when we lost a dear sister in Christ, Tookie Harto; and the time changed at 2am this morning and we lost an hour of sleep. As it gets closer to Holy Week the time will continue to change. How appropriate during this season of Lent that the time should actually change. If Lent and Jesus have their way with us, our time, our hearts, and our lives will be changed.

This last lesson from the story of Mary and Jesus is about the gift of the moment. Jesus knew He was being anointed for death. He knew what was coming... He'd been talking about it with His disciples, He'd been praying about it, and preparing Himself for it. But on this evening His friends had a dinner party for Him and He was fully present. His friend, Mary, broke open the bottle of extravagant and aromatic anointing oil she'd been saving, and poured its soothing fragrance on His feet, and He was fully present to it. Jesus was present - He was mindful - accepting the gift, savoring the moment, even though an excruciatingly horrible death waited just outside the door for Him.

We don't know what waits outside the door for us. Even as God's dearly and extravagantly loved sons and daughters we are promised nothing regarding our safety, our pleasure, or our preferences. But we have the gift of the moment, as Jesus had, to savor, to be present, to be fully grateful. Every moment, Jesus has taught us, is a gift to be uncorked and poured out in extravagant love, and with humble service.

Lord, in these last days of Lent may we empty ourselves of pride and self-centeredness and mindlessness... and may we be filled and fully present to Your love.

Amen.