

St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA
The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge
Church Year C
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Season: Lent 5
John 12:1-8

Most really successful dinner parties have a diverse guest list. I mean, the dinner parties at Downton Abbey were far more interesting when they involved a mysterious Turkish diplomat like Mr. Pahnuk who conveniently died in Lady Mary's arms, or whatever unsuspecting guest the Dowager Countess decided to engage in some provocative conversation. That makes for a much more interesting evening. And this morning we drop in on another very interesting dinner party with a diverse guest list. It takes place at the home of Jesus' friends, Lazarus and Martha and Mary. And the guests include Jesus and his disciples, especially Judas. Lazarus presence is particularly interesting because only six days and one chapter earlier, Lazarus had been laying dead in the tomb. We're told that Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary were dear friends of Jesus and the sisters summoned him when Lazarus fell ill. Now, by the time Jesus arrived, Lazarus had died and had already been in the tomb for four days. Jesus found Mary and Martha weeping and then, we're told, he wept with them. Extraordinary ! He came to Lazarus' tomb and instructed that the stone be rolled away.

In the words of the King James translation, the fastidious Martha warns him, "Lord, he stinketh!" Jesus replies, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So the stone was rolled away and Jesus cried, "Lazarus, come out". And out he comes blinking his eyes, still bound in his burial clothes, and stinking to high heaven.

This was the seventh and last sign that Jesus performed in John's gospel and certainly is meant to point us forward towards the Resurrection. The Lord, it seems, is the Lord of Life and Death.

And now Lazarus is here at a dinner party. Presumably freshened up a bit and no long stinking, but a vivid reminder of the power of God over Life and Death. And Martha, the diligent Martha, busily serving and seeing to the needs of her guests. And Judas, whose presence casts a dark shadow over the evening. And Jesus, the guest of honor. Then Mary, adoring friend Mary, does something completely unexpected. She takes a pound of very expensive perfume – I mean **very expensive** – and pours it all over Jesus feet and then wipes his feet with her hair. The house, we're told, was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But one of the guests, Judas, is offended by this lavish display of love and compassion. Why waste all this money on foot washing and wiping? Sell it

all and give it to the poor, he complains. And then Jesus says something peculiar. “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.”

This beautiful story of Jesus’ anointing my Mary anticipates two events in Jesus’ hour: Jesus washing of his disciples’ feet at the Last Supper and his burial. In the foot-washing Jesus will wash his disciples’ feet as an expression of his love for them and as a way of drawing them into his life with God. What Jesus will do for his disciples and ask them to do for others, Mary has already done for him. So in Mary we see a picture of the fullness and what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Her acts shows the love that, in John’s gospel, is the mark of a true disciple and it shows that she gets Jesus’ **identity** and **that’s** the decisive mark of the Christian life. The real power in Mary’s discipleship is that she knows how to respond to Jesus without being told what to do. She fulfills his love commandment – he later tells the disciples – “This is my commandment, that you love one another just as I have loved you” before he even gives it. She shows us here what it means to be one of Jesus’ own. She holds nothing back – giving all the love she has – just like Jesus will later give all the love he has in his hour.

Now contrast Mary’s complete self-giving love with Judas. Where Mary is self-giving, Judas is self-centered. What’s in it for me, he seems to be asking. Judas’ betrayal is not just of Jesus but of the flock as well. Placing himself before others, he is the exact opposite of Mary. How can I be important? How can I be noticed? How can I look good? Those are Judas’ concerns. And we see the result.

Second, though, Jesus is also reminding the dinner guests that he’ll only be with them a little while and there is real urgency to respond to Jesus – to trust in Jesus – while he’s still present. Mary has recognized this urgency and responded to it.

And let’s not forget faithful Martha. She’s holding the whole show together. Faithfully caring for the guests, working hard – serving, serving, serving. Without Martha there wouldn’t be a place for anointing Jesus’ feet.

C.S. Lewis has an interesting insight about this story. He refers to the version of the story from Mark’s gospel in which the precious nard is carried in an alabaster jar. He says, “It dawned on me the other day. The alabaster box one must break over Christ’s holy feet is one’s heart. And the content becomes perfume only when it is broken. While they are safe inside, they are more like sewage.”

That’s a brilliant psychological and spiritual insight. How much sewage are we carrying around in our hearts because we don’t open them up to Jesus? How much self-righteousness, how much resentment, how much anger and energy do we carry around

with us like a 60-pound backpack – a backpack full of sewage? When we keep it inside – under pressure – it stinks – stinks like Lazarus in the tomb. It infects our lives – contaminates our lives. But, oh my friends – when we have the courage to crack open our hearts and pour out our heart on the feet of Jesus – wiping Jesus’ feet with our tears, the stink of death we’re carrying becomes the fragrance of new life – of resurrection.

Jesus accepts with deep gratitude Mary’s shower of love on his feet. She’s giving the best she has to the one who’s brought her brother back to life.

As expressions of devotion go, it doesn’t get much better than this complete surrender of love. But Martha’s offering of love isn’t any less important. She serves so that her sister can worship. It’s a reminder of what God holds dear. And God doesn’t care how many hours we work. And God’s not auditing the amount of our pledge. But God does value the love and devotion we bring to every gift, every job, every prayer we make.

And then here’s Judas. The “what’s in it for me” guy. Because he’s looking for love in all the wrong places, his disappointment turns into resentment which he then acts out in the worst destructive way. His tragedy is that he never gives himself the chance to pour out his own heart at the feet of the crucified Christ.

What about us? Can we let go of our pride, our resentment, our self-righteousness? Can we really be honest with ourselves and with God? Can we pour out our hearts at the feet of Jesus? Yes, yes, we can. Now is the time. Lent is the time. What are you carrying around in your heart that needs to be broken open? What old hurts, what resentments, what fierce pride needs to be laid at Jesus’ feet? A week from tomorrow, Monday of Holy Week, is the Liturgy of Reconciliation, at 7 pm. It is a wonderful opportunity to break open your heart and pour yourself out at Jesus’ feet. It’s a time for healing and compassionate forgiveness. When we break open our hearts at Jesus’ feet, the room is filled with a holy fragrance, the fragrance of love and service, the sweet aroma of mercy. It smells like Heaven. Amen.