

5th Sunday in Lent
"Why are you here this morning?"
John 12:1-8
3/17/13

I have a question for you this morning.
Why are you here?

That may seem like an odd question for your new pastor to ask you,
but seriously "Why are you here?"

If you are wondering why I'm asking, think about this:

There are over 3 million people who live in Orange County... right?
What percentage of that total do you think are in worship this morning?

Would you guess 40% or 30%?

According to the best data I could find, the estimate is about 20%
And so there are a lot of people who have found other things to do this morning.

But you are here. You chose to be here this morning.
And there is a reason each of you have chosen to be here.

Today's Gospel has a lot to say about the choice you've made.

In this passage from John, chapter 12 we hear about the most amazing gift anyone ever
offered to Jesus. It was:

... an extravagant gift
... a gift given from the heart
... a gift, that above all... was an offering of worship.

...which is the gift each of you chose to make this morning...
... a gift from your heart, a gift of praise, an offering of worship.

So let's connect your story with the story of Mary in today's Gospel.
And let's learn together, how your offering of worship matters to God.

As you might know, this year our Gospel readings are drawn from Luke.
But this morning as we follow Jesus closer to the cross
our lectionary gives us this important story from John, chapter 12.

Keep in mind, that often in the Gospels, and especially in John,
things are happening on two levels at the same time.
Each Gospel writer tells us the story of Jesus.... his life, death, and resurrection.

That's the first level...the first layer of the story.
But Matthew, Mark, Luke and John each put flesh on the story in a different way.
Each writer uses different symbols...they use their own voice, their own unique
vocabulary. And the result is a unique witness ... a unique testimony.

So, let's take a look this morning...first of all, at the surface level of today's Gospel. And then let's look deeper, below the surface.

On the surface level this is a story about Jesus spending some time at the home of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha...a brother and two sisters who live in Bethany.

In the middle of the meal, Mary pours costly perfume on Jesus' feet and washes his feet with her hair...something that is clearly an act of lavish, extravagant devotion.

But knowing that 300 denarii, was equal to nearly a year's wages, brought a challenge by Judas. Judas, before he became known as the one betrayed Jesus, happened to be the disciples' treasurer. He was the one who kept the common purse...the fund the disciples used to provide for their own needs and for the poor. "Why was this perfume not sold and the money given to the poor?" Judas asks.

But now let's look at what's happening below the surface.

First of all, John carefully tells us that the Passover is near.

This mention of the Passover is a foreshadowing, of Jesus' death.

And then, one verse after John tells us that Jesus has come to the home of Lazarus, he bothers to mention again, that, "Lazarus was one of those at the table with Jesus."

After all, it's Lazarus's house, why wouldn't he be at the table?

At a deeper symbolic level, John is reminding us that this is Lazarus...back from the dead Lazarus. In the previous chapter (John 11), Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, and his presence this dinner table is a powerful symbol of death and resurrection.

Now so far, we've got The Passover and Lazarus...but John has more for us to see. He wants to make a connection between this dinner party and the Last Supper. And he does that... in a couple of ways.

First, if you heard this in the Greek, you'd notice that the specific word he uses for "dinner" is the same word that he uses elsewhere for "Last Supper."

Also, when Mary wipes Jesus' feet, the verb that John uses is the same one that he uses to describe Jesus, washing his disciple's feet, at the Last Supper. Isn't that interesting?

Out of all these symbols and layers of deeper meaning the most important one in this story, however, is the deep meaning of Mary's act.

Not only, did she wash Jesus feet.

Not only, did she anoint them as an extravagant act of worship.

But Jesus tells us, that it was a burial anointing.

When Judas pretended to be concerned, and complained in his false piety... that Mary should have sold the expensive perfume and given the money to the poor, Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Leave her alone. She bought this perfume that she might keep it for the day of my burial."

Notice this profound act of devotion didn't come from Peter, or James, or even John, the beloved disciple. It didn't come from Lazarus, who literally owed his life to Jesus.

It came instead from Mary, who took a bottle of very expensive perfume and poured it on Jesus' feet, then wiped his feet with her hair.

How do we explain such an amazing act of generosity and devotion?

Part of the secret of generosity and devotion is discernment... the ability to see things for what they really are...the ability to see life as it really is.

Have you ever noticed that the most generous, the most gracious people you know, are also the most thankful people you know.

People who "get" grace, who understand how God has blessed us...see life differently.

For years, my mom worked as a registered nurse, and during the years she worked in a hospital she saw many things. One thing I remember her telling me is how big a difference there is between a patient who is thankful for the gift of health, and other patients who take their health for granted. Not every patient has the discernment to be thankful.

In our Gospel reading today, the room was full of people, but only Mary discerned the presence of Jesus in a way that prompted gratitude.

But the issue is more than just discernment. Mary was not blowing up helium balloons or lighting candles to show her gratitude to Jesus. By pouring on him the costly perfume, she was anointing Jesus... for burial.

Mary's costly gift of gratitude grew out of an awareness that Jesus was going to give the most costly gift of all--- his very life.

In other words, in this Gospel, John wants us to see the deeper meaning of Mary's devotion. He wants us to see, through Mary's sacrifice, the even greater sacrifice of Jesus. And that ...is the key to this story.

Jesus is about to enter Jerusalem for the last time to offer himself so that the world might have life and have it abundantly. And like Mary, those who recognize the depth of Jesus' love are also those who see life as it really is. They see and live in God's grace. They live with gratitude, for all God has done.

They are the ones who, like Mary, love freely and generously.

Isn't that why you and I are here this morning?

Others might look at you and find it strange that you chose to be here instead of on a soccer field... or mountain biking... or at the beach.

They might consider... this a waste of time...and the offerings you give a waste of money.

But remember what Jesus saw in Mary's gift?

It was a gift from the heart.

It was an offering of worship...a gift given out of love and gratitude...to Jesus.

And is there any other reason to worship?

Let us also pour out our praise, and our gratitude...and our love... to our Lord and Savior...who gave himself for us

and who calls us to follow Him, and serve Him, holding nothing back. Amen