Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, April 6, 2025

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

Isaiah 43:16-21 Psalm 126 Philippians 3:4b-14 John 12:1-8

Oh God, we are truly unruly. Fix our hearts with you. Above all other passions and fixations and allures, fill us with your love, and set our hearts ablaze with love for you. Amen.

Let's pick up where our Senior Warden, Ian Hicks, took us in his sermon last week. Everyone loves a celebration and a good party.

And here in today's Gospel, we have a real celebration – at the home of a man brought back to life again from the dead! It is time for a party! Lazarus is alive again! This is his home, with family and friends and followers of Jesus.

And at this party, we have some characters. Right? Like at any dinner party. We have the family whose home we are in. We have the guest of honor. We have friends and close companions of the guest of honor. And in this group, we have the passionate soul who lays it all out there, and we have the uptight zealot or the one harboring secrets, who complains.

Maybe you have some folks like these in your circles of family, friends, companions, and neighbors?

Before we dive into this scene more intently, let's just back up and appreciate the beauty of this intimate, celebratory dinner gathering. When there is something profound or beautiful that has happened in our lives, we want to gather our nearest and dearest. When something is restored or brought to fresh life or rediscovered, we want to bring together our beloved folks to celebrate. As Ian reminded us last week, a woman finds a lost coin, and calls her neighbors together, "Rejoice with me!"; and when a sheep herder finds a lost lamb, he brings it home and calls to his comrades, "Rejoice with me!" And when a son lost to the world and thought dead returns to his father's homestead, his father rushes out, embraces him, and calls for a celebration in his entire household, with family and farmstead workers.

There is something beautiful about time with others, to celebrate. There is also something beautiful and powerful about shared meals with others, in times of sadness or mourning, or in times of deep uncertainty. After a funeral there is often a receptions, and sometimes it's a buffet meal. We mark our sadness and grief together, and also share blessed memories and ongoing relationships that we treasure. In the early centuries of the Church, when Christians were considered strange and not understood, and then later were hunted down and imprisoned, fined, exiled, or executed, followers of Jesus gathered in homes in smaller circles of fellowship for sharing the stories and sharing a meal that included the sacred sharing of bread and wine – and there was support and sustaining hope shared together. As was prayed at the end of the sacred meal together in those uncertain early decades of the Church, "Let Thy grace come and let this world pass away ; Hosanna to the God of David." (from The Didache [The Teaching of the Twelve] 10:6).

There is something incredibly powerful about the experience of gatherings like this, at the home of Lazarus. This is home church. This is what some have called "dinner church." It is when followers of Christ come together in more intimate settings – beyond the synagogue, beyond the walls of a church, back home with others you gather. Many people prefer this kind of close setting for their church experience, and so there are house

churches all across this country and the world. Some years before I came to St. Luke's, there were house dinners among church members and newcomers, and they became an opportunity to invite other folks. We find that our book groups and discussion groups open space for people to find some closer kinship and fellowship as they share meaningful insights and discoveries of truths with each other – a rich meal in itself.

In such places, we are blessed by the sacred joys of company with each other, recognizing the gift from God that we are to each other. Just as we are here, in these more intimate gatherings we are filled with gentle gratitude and hope.

> Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.
>
> Those who sowed with tears will reap with songs of joy.
>
> Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed,
> will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves. (Ps. 126:2,6,7)

So, it is here, in such a gathering – an incredibly joy-filled, wonder-filled gathering in the home of Lazarus the friend who is alive again, in the home he shares with his sisters Martha and Mary, with their dear friend Jesus and his many companions on the road – it is here that we experience someone giving an extravagant gift, and someone else grumbling about the inappropriateness of the gift.

As it turns out, humans show up with their humanity everywhere. All the beauty and grace that shines forth from us as the image of God. And all the ugliness and bitter brokenness that leaks out to ruin a good moment.

Mary offers the most extravagant gift she can give to Jesus. And Judas condemns the gift, accusing Mary of bad faith and holding up a righteous ideal to cast this moment of gift in a bad light.

Let's take in Judas first. As much as we might not want to, let's consider Judas more closely. Because there is a part of us that can so easily be Judas. And there are so many ways we see Judas-like behavior and thinking happening in the world around us.

What's behind Judas's reaction? We could call it righteous indignation. Or, unrighteous indignation. Either way, it is a hostile, angry condemnation that comes spilling out from Judas. It has the flavor and tone of "How dare she?"

Where does this come from?

Let's go back to one of the earliest books in the Bible, the Book of Job. In Job, the Satan – the condemner, the challenger, the prosecutor – appears before God in the book of Job, and casts sneers toward Job when God notes delight in Job. "If he didn't have all the goodies in his life, he wouldn't want anything to do with you, God." And when Job lost all in disaster after disaster, and still held his faith in God, Satan said, "Well, if he suffers directly, in his own body, he'll curse and reject you, God."

Do you hear how petty this is? And how manipulative? And mean-spirited?

This is what "righteous indignation" often boils down to. We can get so enamored with our own values and ideas of what is ultimately good – and that blinds us to the paths of love opening up in front of us. Our vision, our perceptions, our hopes all get constrained and twisted into the limited shape we impose upon life. We hold above other's heads something we think is superior good to whatever "weaker" good they are offering. "Why did you help that homeless person? Don't you know they'll just take advantage of you? Why don't you give money instead to an agency that pushes them into employment."

But Judas's motivation was not even so pure as feeding the poor. He was the purse-keeper for the band of Jesus' followers, and he had been helping himself. And he was already planning toward betraying Jesus. So, Judas's

reaction is out of rising disdain for Jesus and all he represents. And his words disguise deeper hidden motivations, as he pretends to himself and the world around him a zealous faithfulness that covers the twists of lies he has spun to justify his actions.

These twists can sneak into any of our lives, any of our hearts and minds. And people gripped by such lies and sinful motivations can infect any gathering, any family, any community, any church, any nation. When Jesus spoke of being the good shepherd, he said that anyone who sneaks in by another gate or climbs into the holding place for the sheep is a thief and a bandit – the same words John uses to describe Judas.

Remember, Judas is also a follower of Jesus.

But Jesus isn't having any of Judas's complaint or condemnation of Mary's loving gift. He tell Judas to leave Mary alone. In his whole rebuke, he is essentially saying, "Let go of your indignant refusal of the good of her gift." And Jesus then says, "The poor you will always have with you."

Now, let's be clear. "The poor you have with you always" – this is not an excuse for ignoring the poor! And it's not a response followed by "let's party instead." Jesus is making reference to a teaching and expectation in the Torah, in Deuteronomy 15:11, to "always open our hands to the poor." Jesus is saying, "you will have continuing opportunity to help the poor, always." But let this moment be what it is. What is happening right now, what Mary is doing and has done right now, is deeply important. It is a moment that is close, deeply loving, and intimately connected with those gathered together here. Let your hand always be open to the poor – but also give yourself fully in any moment to offering the fullness of love.

So now we can turn our attention to Mary. Mary of the house in Bethany that was such a well-loved place for Jesus. Thank God, there is a part of us that can so easily lean into being like Mary. And there are so many ways we see Mary-like behavior and thinking and feeling, in places and people in the world around us.

What did Mary do? She poured out and slathered out an expensive box of perfumed ointment, on Jesus's feet. This perfumed ointment, in a sealed jar made of alabaster, was worth about 300 denarii, or about a year's decent wages, in today's terms about $45,000 to $55,000.

And at this moment, we find ourselves drifting toward Judas's question. Isn't this a bit wasteful? And maybe the questions comes to mind, why did Mary have this ointment in the first place, and why wasn't this household using its money for bigger impact in the community around them?

On top of that, think about a jar of strongly scented ointment or oil being poured and spread out, so that the smell permeates all the air and the whole house. You might remember when we have pine and fir branches here in the church during Advent and Christmas, and the smell that we enjoy. But – magnify that intensely ten times, and you might feel a bit overwhelmed.

Why did Mary do this? What's behind Mary's action, this incredibly extravagant act that she offered?
This was Mary's overflowing gift to Jesus. It was a showing, a sign, a sort of sacramental act, of her deep, deep love of Jesus and her honoring of all that he was and stood for.
Remember the gift of joy of the father for the prodigal son that we heard last week, when that son who was thought lost and dead came back to the father's homestead? Remember the fervent joy and passion of the father, who told his workers to bring the best clothes for the son and to kill the fatted calf for a huge feast? Remember how the son who had stayed on the homestead reacted with anger and disgust and a protest of unfairness, because of such an extravagant offering?

Mary is the tender-hearted soul in this household. She was the one who sat at Jesus' feet to hear him and be near him, who frustrated her sister Martha because Martha ended up preparing the meal. It was Mary's crying from her heart about her dead brother Lazarus that released Jesus' tears and made Jesus weep, even though Martha

had come to meet Jesus just a few minutes before and had said the very same words. And now, Mary, the tender-hearted soul, lavishes an incredibly valuable treasure on Jesus, in front of everyone else. Without shame, without embarrassment. Mary is fully in, with all her heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Mary shows us a way into full-hearted, fully embodied discipleship.
It's intimate.
It's self-giving in the fullest sense of the word. Like in the wedding vows, "With all that I am, and all that I have, I honor you." It is being all in.

Such a level of trust and openness to each other doesn't just appear out of nowhere. It has grown, been nurtured with each other, welcomed, and established and anchored over time.

Mary anointing Jesus' feet – well, as Jesus notes, it anticipates and leads toward the anointing of Jesus' body at the time of his death. This was still a well-known practice in our homes even up to 100 years ago – when we washed and cared for the body of a loved one who died, preparing that physical part of them for burial. That doesn't happen as much anymore. But, when I have the honor of being with a family when someone dies, after our initial time around the bedside, and after a little time away, I invite the family back in, to say good-bye in words and with touch, to touch the loved one's physical being at least one more time.

Mary anoints Jesus' feet, in a way that reminds everyone in the room of the care and anointing of the dead. And Mary's loving action also anticipates another important moment – when Jesus takes up a towel and washes his disciple's feet.

In the last month of my Dad's life, Dad couldn't do much to get up and get around. From those final weeks, I treasure a memory of beginning to massage his feet and legs, and him expressing such gratitude and relaxing enjoyment of this simple gesture. Earlier in his life, he'd never been into foot rubs as far as I could remember – but he liked shoulder and neck massages. But now, this was a new experience for him, in a time of great weakness. We were both filled with gratitude for these moments. I remember my assisting him in getting to the commode by his bed, and eventually helping to clean and dress him when he could not longer get out of bed, and helping to sponge-wash his body – and his warm and gentle gratitude each time. I treasure these as sacramental moments between my father and me, filled with God's grace and love.

Both Mary and Judas are making preparations for the end of Jesus' life. Mary is preparing with openness to the possibility of Jesus' death. Judas is preparing to betray Jesus to death – and is all entangled in the schemes and the hiding of schemes related to betrayal – and is entangled in his confused way of trying to be faithful while also embarking on a path of severing his relationship with Jesus…

Extravagance.
Extravagance – Give all you have in moments that matter.
Like God in Jesus our Savior and the Lover of Humankind – pouring himself out fully and completely for us, holding nothing back.

Let your hearts open wide in loving adoration of Jesus. Let yourself be drawn to Christ, and drawn fully into the heart of Christ. Let yourself, like Paul (as we heard in the Epistle today), be drawn to walk the way of suffering and willing death with this One who loves us so.

By opening yourself in this way, you will touch the power of resurrection.