

Isaiah 43:16-21

John 12:1-8

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Irene Pak Lee

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## **Brazen Acts of Beauty**

Well friends, we are already into a new month. Time keeps pressing on and here we are on the 5th Sunday of Lent. Holy Week begins next Sunday and Easter is already right around the corner. We have traveled the long wilderness and survived it as best as we could and resurrection is coming. We began the journey marked with ashes and reminded of our mortality and now start the process of entering into a time where we reflect on Jesus' final days. As we do so, the lectionary brings us to this gospel story that embodies and touches all of our senses, perhaps in ways we're not always used to scripture doing.

This story of Mary breaking open an alabaster jar and pouring expensive perfume on Jesus' feet and wiping it with her hair is told in all four gospels. Each writer tells the story slightly differently, as all of the gospels have their own emphasis and point they try to get across, but there's no denying that this is one of the most tender, alluring, intimate, and dare I even say sensual stories in the New Testament. It's just so brazen, what she does-so bold and without any shame, even for today's standards. Imagine yourself at a party-you're talking, having a good time, enjoying a good meal...and then one of the hosts out of nowhere comes out and breaks open a jar of expensive perfume, pours it on the guest of honor's feet, and then takes down her hair and using her hair to wipe it around. Am I supposed to look? Do I cover my eyes? Do I look away? Or do I get my phone out and start recording it because what in the world is even happening?? What a video wouldn't capture is the smell of fragrance filling the air and the sound of silent shock. It's a brazen act, even by today's standards.

In the gospel of John, the woman is Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. Remember the story of Martha who hurries around doing everything and gets frustrated with her sister Mary who sits at Jesus' feet listening to him? It's those sisters. And remember the story of Lazarus, whom Jesus raises from the dead? The one for whom he weeps standing outside his tomb? Yeah, that has just happened prior to where our reading began today. This sibling trio is not just a group of random people that Jesus happened to run into. The way the gospel talks about them each time they make an appearance indicates that these are Jesus' friends. They weren't his disciples, they were his friends. Scripture straight up tells us they Jesus loved them multiple times when they are mentioned. Maybe they were the ones who did not only see him as a rabbi and teacher, but saw him for who he really

was. Maybe they joked around with Jesus, teased him about who he had to heal that day, or maybe Jesus got to vent to them about something silly a disciple had said to him. They knew him.

But even more than that, even as Jesus loved them, they also loved him. I read recently that we do not talk about that much when it comes to Jesus—the way in which he was loved. We talk a lot about it the other way—how Jesus showed love, gave love and embodied love. But we don't talk about the ways in which he received love. And even though we proclaim him Messiah, I'm guessing as fully human, he needed that too. In our gospel lesson today, Jesus receives love. Jesus receives love.

It happens in the midst of a dinner party that these friends are hosting for him. Scripture tells us that Mary takes a pound of costly perfume, which was worth a year's wages and then anoints Jesus' feet with it. Stop and absorb that for a second. Something that costs a year's salary... think about owning anything that expensive and then opening it up in the middle of dinner. If she was saving it for a special occasion, she knew this was the right one. It truly was a brazen act of love...and the scene is a beautiful one.

But again, it's also shocking. Why would she do that? It's so impractical! Wasteful even. Scripture gives us this added commentary about Judas' reaction in asking about it, but he's asking a good question. Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and money given to the poor? Even if his motivation was not because he cared about the poor, even if he was the one who was about to betray Jesus, his question is still a good one. It's a practical one. It follows all of the sensibilities of what Jesus has taught them so far.

And yet, to this extravagant and bold act, Jesus defends Mary. He knows what she is doing for him and he receives it. He allows himself to be the recipient of this extravagance and act of love. "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me," he says. I wonder if he knew he would need this bold act of love to help carry him through his own final days.

Theologian Debie Thomas writes beautifully about what this gift was as Mary offered it to Jesus. She writes, "Mary recognizes the importance of meeting the world's brokenness, cynicism, and pain with priceless, generous beauty. Even as death looms, she chooses to share what is heartbreakingly fragile and fleeting: a fragrance. A sensory gift. An experience of beauty. Her perfume is her protest. Her scented hands are her declaration. In anointing Jesus in beauty, she declares that the stench of death will not have the last word in our lives — the last word will belong to the sweet and sacred fragrance of love."

I love that. The stench of death will not have the last word in our lives-the last word will belong to the sweet and sacred fragrance of love.

I believe that statement is true, and yet, I know that does not take away the pain and reality of that stench of death in our lives. All around us, globally, nationally, locally and personally, we continue to wrestle with the realities of war, injustice, struggle, and death. The challenge for us today is not to ignore or pretend those things don't exist, but today's gospel lesson seems to be asking us, in light of those realities of death, war, injustice, and struggle, what is something we can do today to put a bold act of love into the world? What brazen act of love and beauty can you take to fill the space around you with a new fragrance of something new? What are the ways in which we can offer love to God in Christ? For in this moment, we still have him with us...so that very important jar we are holding on to for a special occasion, when and for whom will we break it?

On this fifth Sunday of Lent, we know that Jesus is getting ready to journey into the greatest act of love for us. What would you do if you knew you knew you only had a short while with Christ? What impractical thing would you do if you had a few days with someone you loved? What brazen act of love and beauty would you share with them? What if we stopped waiting for the perfect moment and shared that gift we have been holding on to now?

I recently asked a similar question to friends and to folks on social media: "If you could have a few days with someone you've loved and lost, what would you do? What would you say? Where would you eat? Where would you go?"

Reading through the responses filled my heart and flooded my eyes:

I would hug them a lot-hold on until they let go.

I would be present to every moment and soak up their presence

We would take a walk on the beach holding hands... talking and sharing and catching up on our lives... I would want them to meet their grandbabies...hang out drinking beer and playing card games...go to the US Open together, go to a concert together, bake cookies together... tell jokes and make each other laugh until we cried. I'd relish one more of those laughing until we cried together.

We'd eat lobster, shrimp, gumbo, peanuts and hot dogs, steak-lots of seafood responses... 😊

I would ask them if they were proud of me and who I've become

I would tell them how much I miss them and love them and how blessed I was to have them in my life ... I would want to try and make them laugh one more time.

I would just love a few minutes-I don't care what we did-even just one minute to know she's okay, to tell her we are trying to be okay, to thank her for loving me.

Friends, what would you do if you knew you knew you only had a short while with Christ? What impractical thing would you do if you had a few days with someone you loved? What brazen act of love and beauty could you share with this world? Because this world needs more beauty right now...beauty as resistance to death...beauty as an act of love. Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet is a public act of worship. Her faith does not hide. It is not frugal. It is embodied, broken open and poured out. It's what we would do if we knew we only had a few days left with someone we loved.

Siblings in Christ, in a few moments, we will gather again at this Table, where a few days after Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet, where after he received her generous act of brazen love, he would also kneel at the feet of each of his disciples and pour water and wash their feet as an act of love. And then he would come to this Table and break bread and pour the cup and share it with all of them-ask them to remember him, and to do all things in remembrance of him. And so, we too, will gather to do the same. We will receive this act of love in order that we might share it.

The stench of death will not have the last word in our lives-the last word will belong to the sweet and sacred fragrance of love. And so today, like Mary, may you find that alabaster jar that you are holding on to and saving for the right moment, and break it open as a brazen act of beauty and love for this world. May it be so. Amen.