

Scripture Lesson: John 12:1-8

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 100

¹ Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ² There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at the table. ³ Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus's feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" ⁶ He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it. ⁷ Then Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." ⁸ You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Response to the Word

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God.

All: Thanks be to God!

John 12:1-8

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MEMENTO MORI; MEMENTO VIVERÉ

Pastor Amy Terhune

A waste. That was the accusation, even if the word is never used in John's gospel. She took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard and she wasted it. In one grand gesture, she poured out the entire contents onto Jesus' feet. Perfume worth a year's wages. Think about how much you make in one year. Think about blowing it all in a matter of seconds. Precious oil, made for kings, made for burial of the dead, puddling uselessly on the floor of the house to be mopped up with rags. After it's been rubbed into the Lord's feet to the point where he can hardly walk for slipping around in his sandals; after it's been absorbed by her hair to the point where her hair hangs in strings, the pool of left-over perfume would burn the nostrils of everyone in the house, blotting out the taste of their feast, permeating every ounce of clothing, every fiber of bedding, every towel, every cushion, every curtain. You could smell down the street for weeks, they say; for months, even.

A waste. That is what Christian tradition has said about her, too. This story is told in all four gospels. Only John names her as Mary, the sister of Lazarus, and only John puts all the criticism in Judas' mouth. In Matthew and Mark, it's an unnamed woman who comes to anoints his head rather than his feet, and all the disciples lambast her for her wastefulness. But neither John, nor Mark or Matthew, say anything about her character. Luke declares she's a sinner but doesn't say how. That didn't deter some Pope fifteen hundred years ago from proclaiming that the only profession a woman could undertake to earn the kind of money needed to buy such a gift was to be a harlot. Scripture never says that anywhere, but such things have a way of sticking around. Now, given that spikenard comes from the spike-like shape of the root and spiny stem of an herb plant that was found high up in the Himalayan Mountains, which run along the border between India and China, some 4,000 miles from Jerusalem, it's no wonder it's so costly. That's a long way for perfume to travel. But it could have been an heirloom, a wedding gift, or an inheritance. She may have come from a wealthy family. Given that Jesus and his disciples often stay in Bethany with Lazarus and Mary and Martha, it's not

unreasonable to guess that household had some resources at their disposal – resources enough to house and feed a few dozen guests on a regular basis.

But Jesus never calls it a waste. And Jesus never sees her as a waste, either. Let's talk about Mary, just for a moment. She has a sister, Martha. Martha is a worker bee. You might remember that Martha complains to Jesus when she's working hard in the kitchen while Mary sits at Jesus' feet with the men to learn. "Tell her to help me!" Martha complains to Jesus, but Jesus won't do it. Mary stays, listens, learns. What does she hear? She hears Jesus tell his disciples that the Son of Man must be killed and in three days, rise again. The disciples don't want to hear that. They don't know how to process that. So they just don't.

But Mary and Martha also have a brother, Lazarus, who falls ill and dies in the chapter just before this one. Mary was inconsolable in her grief. She was also about to be suddenly bereft in her circumstances. Her sister Martha, the more practical one, got up from her mourning and went to meet Jesus at the outskirts of town, demanding answers and explanations, but not Mary. Mary just weeps.

So you can imagine how she felt when her beloved brother comes stumbling out of the tomb after being dead four days, still wrapped up in his putrid sticky grave-clothes, blinking at the sun. They take him home alive, and Mary senses that something incredible has just happened.

I have to think that maybe she gets it. This one who raised her brother, who is talking about rising again, who is talking not about political revolution but about a revolution in the human condition – renewed hope, renewed hearts, new life itself. I have to think she gets it. And instead of denying it, instead of trying to explain it away, instead of trying to pretend the awful isn't coming, she seizes a moment to respond to his incredible vision, his extravagant gift, his extraordinary teaching and she pours herself out at his feet. It's not a waste. It's a declaration of faith. She knows he's the Messiah. And she knows that the Messiah, from the Hebrew word *Mashiach* or the Greek word *Christos*, means 'the anointed one'. Who anoints our Messiah? It wasn't shepherds or wisemen or scribes and pharisees. It wasn't Peter or James or John or any of the other disciples. It wasn't the High Priest or the Roman governor. It wasn't even John the Baptist. No, who anoints our Messiah? She does. Mary does. Where once Martha had warned Jesus against opening her brother's tomb, lest the stench of death overwhelm them, it is now the sweet fragrance of life, love, gratitude, and devotion that lingers in the house, in the neighborhood, in the fabric of life itself.

Some say that fragrance is the most powerfully evocative sensory perception that human beings can experience – that more than sight, sound, touch, or taste, fragrance can trigger memories in us, for better or worse. A scent coming out a restaurant window can transport us back in time by decades to grandma's kitchen. A whiff of gun powder, smoke, or jet fuel may trigger an episode of PTSD in traumatized soldier. Scents can take us back to significant moments, important relationships, traumatic episodes. We forget, until it hits us again.

More on that in just a moment, but let me switch gears briefly. At the beginning of Lent, when we observe the solemnity of Ash Wednesday, the liturgy reminds us of God's words to the very first humans from Genesis 3:19 – Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. The Latin liturgy, which we Methodists are not very familiar with so you'll have to take my word for it, begins with the words "Memento Mori" which doesn't exactly translate "remember that you are dust" but rather, "remember that you're mortal". But Jennifer Delgado offers a very different take. She writes, "The phrase "*memento mori*", which is often mistranslated as "*remember that you will die*", actually also has another meaning when analyzed in a more correct translation: "*remember that you must die*". The difference is subtle but important as it is not only a reminder of our mortality but also an exhortation to prepare for that moment in life. [from Jennifer Delgado, <https://psychology-spot.com/memento-mori-meaning-origin/>]

Remember that we must die to the flesh and live to the spirit. Remember that we must die to self and live to Christ. Remember that we must die to ambition and live to Jesus' calling. Remember that we must die to greed and live to trust in God's providence. Only when we accept that we must die can we truly appreciate life's value, life's gifts, life's beauty.

I'm going to show you now a brief clip from the movie 'Amazing Grace' which tells the story of William Wilberforce, the British statesman who labored for more than 25 years to abolish the slave trade in the British Empire before he finally succeeded on February 18, 1807. Twenty-five years it took. He weathered enormous criticism and censure for the sake of a vision that few others shared so consistently. In this particular scene, Wilberforce finally figures out that, much like those in the house with Mary when she broke open her alabaster box, in order to get to people's hearts, he'll have to go by way of their noses. [Watch clip from "Amazing Grace" 54:18 – 56:52.]

The stench of slavery may have changed minds in the moment, but it was the aroma of Wilberforce's devotion – of a life poured out over decades that changed the course of history. So let me draw this to a close with words from Rev. Lori Wagner. These are HER words, not mine. I want to give credit where credit is due. She writes,

"Our senses help us remember.

"Jesus, in his most difficult moments, will remember this act of devotion and worship, comfort, and love, and I have to imagine that her extravagant empathy will reassure him that the human spirit is capable of great loyalty and love.

"That day, Mary did not want to anoint him when dead but to consecrate him while alive, to declare her love, confirm his call, and prepare him for his mission – the most difficult he will ever undertake.

"For Judas, money erased empathy. For Mary, spikenard only increased it. All who witnessed her act that day would not only remember her unusual service, but the scent and reminder of the "messiah," the "anointed one" would remain in Lazarus' home for a long time to come, reminding them who Jesus was and of the promise that Jesus made – a promise that his "memento mori" would not be the end of his (or their) story, but only the beginning. This is what Mary understood – that through what he would endure, Jesus' memento mori would become our memento viveré.. She would make sure that she ...and they... would not forget.... [4 ¶s from "Memento Viveré" by Rev. Lori Wagner, www.Sermons.com.]

Your life, your energy, your gifts, your spirit – all of this is given by our great and merciful God who seems to have infinitely more faith in us than we do in Him. Yale Divinity school professor Hal Luccock once lamented how some people measure their life out with a medicine dropper, lest they give any more than the situation demands. That's not living. We are made to be poured out at Jesus' feet. We are made to be a vessel constantly filled by the spirit. We are made for life.

Years ago, the Psalmist wrote words that Mark Ode is going to sing from Psalm 103:

Bless the Lord, O my soul,

And all that is within me worship his holy name.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and remember all his benefits.

Remember.

Memento Mori. Remember that you must die.

Memento Viveré. Remember that you must live.

This is my body broken for you. Eat and remember.

This is my blood shed for you. Drink and remember.

Bless the Lord, O my soul. Amen.