

Fifth Sunday in Lent, April 6, 2025
Sermon for St. Michael's
The Rev. Joshua Wong

Focus: Mary teaches us three important lessons.

Function: I am preaching this sermon to share what Mary teaches us, using our body to serve God, give to God the most beautiful things we have, and Mary reminds us to take advantage of the moment.

Gospel: John 12:1-8

Today's Gospel finds us at a dinner party that Lazarus is hosting for Jesus.

Possibly this is a dinner of gratitude for raising him from the dead. All four

Gospels has this account of the story. In **John's** version, the woman is Mary of

Bethany, the sister of Martha and the newly resurrected Lazarus, who was their

brother. During the festivities, Mary breaks open her alabaster jar, anoints Jesus

with a scented oil worth a year's wages and wipes his feet with her hair. As the

fragrance of the oil fills the house, Judas reprimands Mary for her generosity:

"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" But Jesus silences him: "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."

Mary is a powerful story of a woman who dares to love extravagantly — she's not afraid of ridicule and censorship, thereby receiving the blessing of Jesus. And she teaches us three important lessons.

First, what I appreciate most about this story is how Mary demonstrates her love for Jesus by using her body or her physicality. She shows Jesus her love with all her senses. We can imagine the smell, and the touch in the Gospel reading. Mary kneels at Jesus' feet, with an alabaster jar filled with priceless perfume to love Jesus. Hands to feet, Hair to skin, soaked fingers to toes. She shows her gratitude to Jesus through her body. We are people who use their bodies to show their love for Jesus. Our worship service is full of demonstrative gestures that lead us to loving God. Take for instance the celebration of Holy Communion. If we are able to, we kneel and stretch out our hands to receive the bread and the cup. We taste the body of Christ. We gesture the sign of the cross when we hear the name of Jesus as a sign of honor. We bow during the Sanctus, "Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, Hosanna in the Highest." Some churches incense people and things that we want to make and keep holy by our prayers. The smoke, as the psalmist reminds us, is a sign of the prayer rising up so the blessings can come down. During the Eucharist, we hear the chimes from the bell during the consecration to draw attention to the symbolic moment when the bread and wine are converted into the body and blood of Christ. All of these are what Mary's act shows us as using our physicality to honor God. So next time, don't be afraid to participate in doing the sign of the cross, or bowing, or raising your hands as a

worship to God. If you don't feel comfortable doing it yet, do what is comfortable, God knows our heart.

Other ways we use our physicality as a sign of love to God is demonstrated in the work of our altar guild members who wash, iron, climb on ladders, and vacuum the floors to prepare for the church services throughout the year. And those who tend to our Building and Grounds, who kneel to fix the church seats, or crawl under the church to repair things. These are some of the ways people show their love to Jesus through physical bodies.

In this Gospel, we also learn that besides Mary using her body to serve, she also honors beauty. In **Mark's** version of the story, Jesus tells Mary's critics that her gesture is "a beautiful thing," worthy of honor and remembrance. Over and against Judas's pragmatism, Jesus celebrates the fragrant and the delectable. In doing so, he gives us permission to savor the good gifts of life on this fragile, fertile earth — the pleasures of our senses, the beauties of nature, and the fruits of human creativity and artistry.

Our Episcopal denomination respects and honors art and beauty as a form of worship. Notice all the stain glass artwork that are in our churches, the importance of music in our churches, or beautiful fresh flowers we have every Sunday. Some of us didn't grow up in a Christian tradition that put much importance in beauty — liturgical or otherwise. If anything, beauty was often viewed with suspicion as frivolous and distracting. Some of us believed that "real" piety only resided in sound doctrine and firm faith. So I'll be honest; Judas's criticism gave me pause. Shouldn't we be sensible? Shouldn't we be guided by our strategic plans, our bottom lines? Aren't we supposed to balance our budgets? Yes, and No. Not always. Mary shows us, not when it is at the expense of the life-giving and the beautiful. Is Mary's gift lavish? Yes. Is it "useless" in the practical-minded economy Judas brings to the table? Yes. Is it efficient, orderly, or logical? No. And yet Jesus cherishes and blesses it. As writer Mary Gordon puts it: "In the moment of the washing of the feet by Mary, Jesus insists that beauty matters: that the aesthetic can take precedence over the moral. " Think about it this way: in your times of trouble and hardship, what has comforted you the most? Being pragmatic or the lavish and "useless" gestures of someone who loves you? Such as flowers, a silly gift, or a nice dinner? How often do we give Jesus what we consider as beautiful from our hearts?

An example of this is someone in our parish who comes here during the week and waters all the potted plants. I'm sure it was done from a heart like Mary's.

Keeping the flowering plants alive so that we can all have a wonderful experience when we come here. It's her offering of something beautiful to God. I also remember Melanie who bakes bread for us each Sunday as her beautiful gift to God.

When we restarted Wednesday Children's chapel, I wanted to incorporate for the children a habit of offering as part of what they should do in worship. I spend \$5.00 a week on chrysanthemums or carnations, and each child came forward and put a flower in the offering plate as their gift to God. A teacher once sarcastically remarked, we don't need to have fresh flowers, we have a bowl of old pennies they could use instead. I did not do that, because I wanted the children to experience giving to God something that is precious and beautiful. Mary taught us in this story to offer our best and prettiest offering to our Lord.

Lastly, what we learn from Mary is that she treasures every moment with Jesus. Jesus responds to Judas's criticism with a comment that might sound harsh or confusing: "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

What Jesus is saying is not that the poor don't matter. In fact, many commentators say that Jesus is referring to Deuteronomy 15:11, whose message about poverty and generosity is clear: "There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded." In other words, the call to care for the poor is constant. In fact, if we are called to love Jesus without limit or calculation when he is with us, then we are called to the same limitless and uncalculated extravagance when the poor are with us, which is always.

So what is it about Mary's extravagant gift that merits Jesus's blessing and what can we learn from this? Lutheran minister Reagan Humber says Mary teaches us to act now: "What won't always be with us is the opportunity to see God in whatever and whomever stands right in front of us now. This is the similar experience many of us shared during last week's roundtable conversation regarding passing along our St. Michael's necklace to someone who needed it. We learned that the kingdom of God is here. Most people are waiting for us to "pass the peace," to the next person. Whether it is a pendant, or a valuable guitar, if we are open to it, right now is the moment that God can break our hearts. The love of God is the grace we can offer others now."

There is much to take from the Gospel story today. As we set our sights towards Jerusalem, what is that very important jar we're hanging onto at all costs — when and for whom will we break it? Is it a behavior we aren't willing to give up for Christ? Is it our bank account we hold on to because we are fearful God will not provide? Is it relationship whom God wants us to mend for whom we won't? To what might you be running away from? Mary honors the best and most beautiful, will we offer our best and most cherished to God? The time to love Jesus is now. It's time to break open that treasured jar, because the cross awaits. Pain is coming in Holy Week. What will we do while we have him with us? Amen.