

Title: All In The Family
Text: John 12: 1 – 7
Date: April 7, 2019

I'm no expert on how certain texts were chosen to be in the lectionary at certain times, but at times I feel graced with some insights as to how it all actually fits together. Last week we reflected on what I called the Parable of The Prodigal God, and saw how that reckless, extravagant love was also viewed by some as shocking, and even offensive. It seems to me that this week's story might well be viewed as a demonstration of reckless, extravagant love in action, that is also both shocking and arguably offensive.

I also see this week's little gem of a story as a bridge that prepares us for next week with Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem, the Last Supper, and all that that implies. Consciously or subconsciously, when Jesus is bracing for a kind of cosmic transition, what does he do? He goes to Bethany to have dinner with some close friends.

The town of Bethany had special significance to Jesus.

Jesus was known as the one who had no place to lay his head. Since his actual hometown of Nazareth had threatened to throw him off a cliff, he spent a lot of time in other regions. When Jesus wanted to be alone to pray he sought out the wilderness. But Jesus had one special place he liked to go when he wanted the companionship of friends and the absence of crowds. When Jesus felt the need to be among his closest friends, he traveled to Bethany.

A scant two miles outside of Jerusalem, this is where he felt safe amongst his closest friends - Lazarus, Martha, and Mary – who always “kept the light on for him,” and welcomed him with open arms. Bethany was not where Jesus went to preach or preside. Bethany was where Jesus went to hang out with his buddies.

How special it is to have a safe place – a place where you know that you are always welcome. This could be a whole other direction for a sermon, but as an aside let me ask you: What would it take for this church to be a Bethany for others – a place of safety where they know they could come for love and acceptance? What would it take for your home to have that kind of reputation as well?

These were Jesus' final moments of quiet intimacy before getting caught up in the whirlwind of activities that we call Holy Week. Jesus was among friends at a dinner being held in his honor. Those gathering included his disciples, Martha and Mary, and one other. Let's not forget how surrealistic it was to have Lazarus reclining at table with them, the one who was recently raised from the dead, looking at *everyone* with a new sense of awe and saying, “Good Lord! I'm alive!” (But that's another story.)

In the midst of this “family reunion” of sorts, the most remarkable thing happened. We are told that, **“Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.”**

Nard was an aromatic plant that was likely imported from the Himalayas, in northern India, and “pure nard” means that it was not cut with something cheaper. Not a knock-off from Wal-Mart. This was a costly perfume worth 300 denarii. One denarii was a day's wage. In today's currency that's \$8/hour, 8 hours/day, for 300 days is \$19,200. So, we're talking about possibly \$20,000 worth of precious perfume poured out on Jesus' feet.

It's hard to know what came over her. What did Mary sense that Martha didn't? From what deep place within her did this love erupt that was so reckless, so wasteful, *and* so embodied. This was *not* done decently, nor in order. She was touching his feet, and wiping them with her hair. So much more than a dab on the neck. Is this not an embarrassing scene? This was an effusive love that had to be shown, not just said. The scent of this love filled the house, and permeated their clothes. Surely it followed them when they left . . . an irrepressible reminder of a love poured out.

And Jesus did nothing to stop her. He doesn't say, "**Oh, I couldn't possibly, Mary. Such a nice gesture, but not necessary.**"

You must be ready, though. When you start going around and acting out this kind of abundant love, a love without words, but a love that is heard louder than ever - well, expect resistance. Expect suspicion. Expect rejection. Because most people do not know what to do with this kind of love.

Isn't it interesting how Judas shows up in the middle of this display of abundant love? It's as if he just can't stand it. It's as if there is only so much love he can take . . . and I don't think Judas is alone in that feeling.

In fact, right after Mary's display of love comes the chief priest's decision to kill the object of Jesus' love; namely Lazarus. The very next verse reads, "**When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.**" (John 12:9-11)

What a case study! This is what we do with abundant love! We think it untrue. We don't imagine ourselves worthy of such love, and we make excuses that deem us unlovable. And, we allow ourselves to think that others don't deserve God's love either. We put boundaries around love. Set up stipulations for love. We control love. Confine, contain, and detain love. But love wins.

Perhaps this outpouring of love was just what Jesus needed to carry and sustain him in the week that followed. This is what it looks like to love someone else into their future – especially when that future is uncertain, especially when that future involves suffering. Maybe it is more than just waiting for Jesus to love us. In any event, we'll have more to say about Jesus' death next week.

For now, however, I'd just like to think of the family dynamic here. As many of you are aware, this is not the first time we have heard about Martha and Mary. If you care to, later on you can read in Luke 10 of an earlier time where Martha was distracted with preparations for dinner, and Mary was sitting at the Beloved's feet listening intently. This is all in the family. The same stories keep coming up in varying guises.

If you read various commentators over the years, very often the dynamic between Martha and Mary is set up as though contrasting an inferior path, and a superior path. I think this is unfortunate, and feeds into an unhealthy trap of pitting woman against woman. I am reminded of the words Elizabeth Holland wrote in the 19th century, "**As nobody can do more mischief to a woman than a woman, perhaps one might reverse the maxim and say, nobody can do more good.**"

A couple of weeks ago in our Adult Forum we dipped our toes into a discussion on the Enneagram – a centuries old tool for understanding and exploring our own psycho-spiritual typologies. In that vein, I believe that if you are born a Martha, you'll always be a Martha. If you are born a Mary, you'll always be a Mary. Having said that, however, I further believe that whatever your typology, this can grow in a healthy direction, or devolve in an unhealthy direction. There is always room for transformation.

In our congregation there will always be those who gravitate towards issues of practicality, and there will always be those who weep more readily, or who show expressions of joy more readily. Since we are all in the family, let's make sure we all stay in the family and accept those differences. Don't look down on diligence, and try not to be embarrassed by outbursts of love and joy. Remember verse 7, where Jesus clearly says to Mary's detractor's, "**Leave her alone.**" *And* be nice to ol' Lazarus who walks around with a grin on his face repeating, "I'm alive! I'm alive!" There is a place for all at the table.

What do you see when you see Martha?
What do you see when you see Mary?
What did Mary see when she saw Jesus?
What did Martha see when she saw Mary?
What did Judas see when he saw Mary?
What did Jesus see when he saw Mary?

I am reminded of a thought-provoking observation by Richard Rohr. It is something along the lines of:

Some people see things as they are; most people see things as they are.

Shall I say that again?

Some people see things as they ARE; most people see things as THEY are.

Mary saw things as they truly were in that moment, and she loved with abandon. Judas saw the same scene, saw things as HE was, and judged others negatively. He couldn't begin to comprehend Mary's heart.

Let me close with one final question; the perennial question:

What do you see when you see Jesus?

Amen

John 12: 1 – 7 Mary Anoints Jesus

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ²There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴But 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.) ⁷Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial."