

Sermon 3.13.16

Pastor Joshua Ferris

Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year C

Isaiah 43:16-21 | Philippians 3:4b-14 | **John 12:1-8**

It was only six days before the Passover, which is important to know, because it means that Jesus was only a few days away from the Last Supper, a few days away from being arrested, a few days away from being killed. The religious leaders are coming after Jesus, threats are being made against him, conflict is coming, and everyone can feel it.

But tonight, on this night, Jesus and his followers aren't thinking about any of that. Tonight they're just having a good time and enjoying dinner with their friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus at their house. They're laughing and having fun because everyone is together. The room is full of energy and joy.

Until Mary makes things a little awkward. She takes a jar of expensive perfume, and in front of everyone she gets down on her knees and begins to put the perfume on Jesus' feet, rubbing it in with her hands. The conversations happening around the room slowly stop, and one by one everyone turns to see what's going on, trying to figure out where that smell is coming from, that smell that's filling up the entire house.

Everyone just stares as Mary, silent. She takes her long, beautiful hair and unties it and spreads it all over Jesus' feet and uses it to dry them off. At this point, people are feeling uncomfortable. No one knows what to say. This isn't what happens at dinner parties, in this culture men and women don't touch. It feels awkward and nobody knows how to respond.

Except for Jesus. He had this incredible ability to see into people, to understand their true motivations and desires. And as Jesus watched Mary with the perfume, watched her dry

his feet with her hair, what Jesus saw was a woman who wanted to serve him in love by giving him her very best. Because that's what you give when you're serving someone else out of love.

You give your best.

And this *was* Mary's best. According to Judas, one of the disciples, this jar of perfume was worth three hundred denarii, which was the amount of money the average person would make in a *year*. A year. This jar of perfume was a year's worth of money. Imagine giving away something worth that much! It was probably the most valuable thing that Mary owned. And out of all the things she could have done with it, she chose to use it to anoint Jesus' feet.

She did it because she was thankful. Recently, Jesus had given Mary the most amazing gift. Her brother Lazarus had died while Jesus was away teaching somewhere else. She and her sister Martha had sent Jesus a message while Lazarus was still alive, telling him to come quick because their brother was sick and needed help. By the time Jesus got there, Lazarus had been dead for four days. Mary and Martha had lost the person they loved the most, and they were full of grief and sadness.

But Jesus had done something miraculous. *He brought Lazarus back from the dead!* It was the most amazing gift Mary and Martha could ever receive. Lazarus was alive, their grief and sadness had turned to joy and amazement! They had hope again, because of Jesus. They were filled with love, and they were thankful, so thankful that the only thing Mary could think to do to show just how truly thankful she felt was to give Jesus the most valuable thing she owned. To anoint his feet with this expensive perfume. She did it because she was thankful.

And she did it because she was sad. She had seen how the religious leader reacted when Jesus brought her brother back from the dead. They were jealous and angry, and in their hate

they decided that enough was enough, and Jesus needed to be killed. Everyone knew that Jesus couldn't keep challenging the religious leaders, couldn't keep challenging the Roman Empire without there being consequences. It was going to happen in just a few days. And since it was Jewish custom to anoint the bodies of the dead with perfumed oil, that's what Mary was doing, foreshadowing Jesus' death and preparing his body. She did it because she was sad, and because she loved Jesus.

Love is the reason why we serve people.

And when we serve others in love, we give them our best.

Not everyone was happy about what Mary had done. Judas was angry, and he pointed out that they could have sold the perfume for a lot of money and given it to help the poor. (v. 5) It sounds like a loving, Christian thing to say, but the writer of John tells us what was *really* motivating Judas. He was the one in charge of keeping all the money given to Jesus and his followers – they called it the common purse – and Judas stole from the purse. Three hundred denarii more would have meant a little more for him to take off the top, and he was angry at the missed opportunity to feed his greed. Sure, Judas talked about serving the poor, and talked about helping the poor in ways that sounded holy and pious, but it was really about him. For Judas, 'the poor' were just objects to be used to help him get ahead.

It's dangerous when people are turned into objects. But we see it a lot in our world today. Right now in politics, candidates are objectifying everyone, turning people into voting blocs that can be wielded and used to achieve victory. If you listen, you'll hear that rich people in our nation aren't really people – they're either patriotic heroes or greedy villains. If you listen, you'll hear that Republicans aren't people, they're backward, redneck idiots from the

stone ages – and Democrats, they're not people either, they're evil communists who want to destroy our country's moral fabric. It's nonsense, but it's working, and by preying on our fears and peddling this false narrative that one side is right and the other is evil we are being divided.

We're even seeing the poor objectified in our country. Some people have turned the poor into scapegoats, blaming them for our economic and cultural woes. Others talk about their desire to help the poor, but like Judas, they've found opportunities to skim some off the top, taking advantage of the poor through predatory lending and for-profit prison and legal systems. Sure, it *sounds* good, but like Judas, it's an excuse to feed greed and take from those who are truly in need.

Any time we turn people into objects to gain something from and stop seeing them as human beings to care for and learn from, we've forgotten what it means to love and serve. We've stopped following Jesus.

It's easy for 'the poor' to become objects. Our world has created a lot of layers of insulation between the rich and the poor, constructing walls like City Avenue that keep us from interacting with each other on a regular basis. And so it's easy for us to think of the poor as just that – "the poor." "The needy." To reduce them to an object, to something abstract, to turn them into a cause. **here**

But when Judas reprimanded Mary for what she had done, Jesus said some interesting words. He said, "You always have the poor with you." (v. 8) People have debated what these words mean, but they're pretty simple. Jesus means that his followers will always be with the poor. Working with the poor. Worshipping with the poor. He means that his followers will always be found with the poor, serving in love.

Jesus is not speaking about shallow, easy ways of serving that allow ‘the poor’ to remain objects. He’s talking about more than just writing checks that help some faceless, nameless poor people somewhere else. Simply writing a check to a cause doesn’t help to break down any barriers. It doesn’t change a system where some people in our nation are rich while others are destined to be poor simply because of the zip code they’re born into. Just writing a check doesn’t cross barriers that divide the rich and poor, or make us ask why there are wealthy people in Narberth who feel safe and have good schools, but just a few miles away in Mantua there are mostly poor people who live in danger and who have bad schools. We must be wary of ways of helping and serving that don’t ask us to sacrifice, don’t lead us to ask deep questions, don’t encourage us to bear someone’s burden, that allow us to keep someone else’s problems at arm’s length so they can remain nameless and we can remain comfortable.

A few months ago, when we were going through some closets here at Holy Trinity, we found a bunch of old worship banners. Most of them were in bad shape – old and ragged, stained and faded. To be honest, some of them were probably pretty ugly to begin with. A group of us decided which ones we would keep, and the rest were going to be thrown away because they were too tattered or too ugly. But someone in our group suggested that instead of throwing these banners out, we could send them down to Grace Lutheran Church in Mantua. The old, ragged, junky, stained ones that weren’t good enough for us anymore. We didn’t send them. We threw them away. And if we ever decide to send some banners to Grace Lutheran, then let’s send the most beautiful ones. Let’s buy them new ones. Let’s give our best.

Because that’s the way Jesus calls us to serve in love.

When we serve in love, we give our best. We give our time and energy. We build relationships. We're vulnerable. We run the risk of looking silly and awkward and weird. We open ourselves up to the possibility of being changed and transformed and having others serve us. We ask questions. We're humble. We give away our power. We give our best.

That is how we love. That is how we serve.

And that is how Jesus loved and served us. Jesus offered his very best – his time, his energy, even his *life* – to serve us in love. Anointed by Mary, he made his way towards the cross, where he would die to show us God's love and grace. Anointed by Mary, he made his way towards the resurrection, where he offers us new life, abundant life, now and forever. Anointed by Mary, who gave her best, Jesus offered his best for us out of love. May we serve one another in love, remembering the one who has served us. Amen.