

The Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year C
The Reverend D. S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
April 3, 2022
Isaiah 43:16-21
Psalm 126
Phillipians 3:4b-14
John 12:1-8

Extravagance of Love

All four canonical gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, contain a story about Jesus being anointed with costly ointment by a woman while seated at a dinner table. In all four versions, someone judges Jesus and the woman—him for allowing the anointing and her for doing it. In three of the four cases, someone is angry about the so-called wastefulness of the action.

- 1) Jesus is anointed
- 2) by a woman
- 3) with costly ointment
- 4) while at dinner and
- 5) somebody judges both Jesus and the woman.

These are the points of agreement in all four stories.

The points of disagreement among the stories include these: Who was the woman? Who was hosting the party? When was it? Where was it? Was Jesus' head anointed or his feet? Who judged the woman and Jesus and/or got angry about it?

Matthew says (Matthew 26:6-13) this event happened in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper two days before the Passover. An unnamed woman pours expensive ointment on Jesus' head as he sits at the dinner table. Jesus' core group of disciples are there and are angry about this, all of them saying the ointment should have been sold and the money given to the poor.

Mark (Mark 14:3-9) concurs that this event transpired two days before the Passover in the home of Simon the leper in Bethany and that an unnamed woman anoints Jesus' head as he sits at the dinner table. Mark doesn't specify the disciples are there but notes that other people are present, and some of them become angry that the ointment is, in their words, "wasted" in this way.

Luke (Luke 7:36-50) says this event took place much earlier in Jesus' ministry in the home of Simon the Pharisee. In this telling, the woman is unknown either to Simon or Jesus. She is possibly a prostitute, and she anoints Jesus' feet, kisses them, and wipes them with her hair. There are others also present at the dinner but no mention of who they are. Simon the Pharisee objects to this action because the woman is known to be a sinner. He doesn't say anything out loud, but Jesus can tell what he's thinking. And Jesus uses Simon's judgment of both Jesus and the woman as an occasion to tell a parable about forgiveness and gratitude.

John (John 12:1-8), as we've just heard, sets this story six days before Passover, and in Bethany, just as Matthew and Mark say. But the home is different. Jesus and others, including Lazarus, whom he has raised from the dead, are having dinner at the home that Lazarus shares with his sisters, Mary and Martha. Martha serves the meal, and Mary, during dinner, serves by bringing a pound of pure nard she has bought for this purpose and anoints Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair. Judas Iscariot who will betray Jesus in just a few days is the one who objects and says that this is a waste of something expensive that could have been sold and the money given to the poor.

Four gospels. Four stories. Similar but different. Jesus is anointed by a woman with costly ointment while at dinner and both he and she are judged for it.

Does it matter if the woman was Mary of Bethany or someone else? Does it matter if it happened in Bethany or someplace else? Does it matter who else was at dinner? Does it matter if it was just before Jesus' execution or much earlier in his ministry? Does it matter if it was Jesus' head or feet that were anointed? Does it matter who got mad or otherwise judgmental about it?

Maybe some or all of this matters. Maybe not.

Maybe what matters most is what was done: anointing with something precious and costly. With something commonly used after death and before burial. Done with great care if not great gratitude and affection. Done at great expense. Done in an intimate and personal way in the presence of witnesses. Done and received by Jesus. Lavish giving. An extravagant gesture. An extravagance of love.

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the unnamed woman who does the anointing brings the costly ointment to where Jesus is in an alabaster jar. No such jar is mentioned in John's gospel perhaps because Mary of Bethany was in her own home. Perhaps

she opened an alabaster jar, removed the nard, and brought it to Jesus at the dinner table. In any case, jars of alabaster are what nard was kept in.

Alabaster is a kind of gypsum, almost always white in color. It can rather easily be carved into all kinds of beautiful ornamental designs. Nard is a type of aromatic, amber-colored essential oil. It is derived from [*Nardostachys jatamansi*,] a flowering plant in the honeysuckle family that only grows in the Himalayas of Nepal, China, and India. According to the gospels, a jar of it in the first century would have cost about 300 denarii, which is to say, all the money that a common working person would earn in an entire year.

What does this story speak to us today? It's the fifth Sunday of Lent. For a full month we have been in our community retreat of discernment regarding what we are called to let go and what we are called to take up. Some of us have discerned some of our individual work. And as a community we are developing greater understanding of our common work. We are praying and talking and paying attention.

I find myself today wondering about the images of costly nard and alabaster jars.

Thinking about the stewardship of this campus and these buildings, it strikes me that this beautiful nave is a kind of alabaster jar. It contains great beauty. We experience it in person and via livestream every week. And we have discerned to keep this space open morning till evening seven days a week in order to share this beauty with everyone. The jar is open. The contents are shared. Everyone who wishes can enjoy it.

In two versions of the story of his anointing with nard Jesus says that the person who is doing it is rendering a kindness to him, that she is doing what she is able to do. In none of the four versions does Jesus stop the giver from anointing him. He receives the gift. People from across the country and around the world receive the gift of being in this space, as do many people who live all or some of the time in Key West and the Lower Keys.

Keeping this jar open is a ministry of beauty and hospitality. And given our location, to refuse to allow this beauty to be freely shared would render us of all people most to be pitied. We would be impoverished if we did not share it. We ourselves would be among the poor always with us.

Opening this space is one thing we do as a community. It's one part of our common work. We continue to identify other dimensions of that work. Living out our mission in ways that are lifegiving to others, in ways that others have asked for, have requested are also part of that common work. Connecting with and supporting congregations and communities in Haiti and Cuba. Forming new alliances for good in Key West and the Lower Keys. These are some of the areas of work currently calling our collective names.

The reading from Isaiah declares that God is doing a new thing—always. Inspiring and bringing about unexpected, impossible-seeming things are God's stock in trade. Helping the weary dream again. Helping, as the reading from Philippians indicates, even people with great pedigrees and mixed track records like St Paul our patron, empowering them, empowering us to live the life Christ calls us to, that God in Christ has opened up and made possible.

What needs to be opened in you, in me, in us and allowed to flow like costly nard? What gift that only you can give will you offer in love to God in Christ and by extension to the world that God so loves? What extravagance of love has the Holy Spirit laid on your heart?

Is it offering your expertise in a particular area? Is it your voice that needs to be lifted up? Is it a significant increase in your annual giving to St Paul's? Is it money that you want to dedicate to a particular area of our budget or to the restoration of these three, count them, three, more-than-a-century-old buildings we have in our care?

Is it something much more personal, much deeper? Is it letting go and letting flow out an old hurt that has taken up way too much space in the alabaster jar of your soul for too long? Is it allowing forgiveness to flow over an ancient argument or disagreement that occupies way too much space inside your head?

If we continue to contain the precious gifts God has given to us, to hold them and withhold them, to continue to keep them for a more suitable season or occasion, what will become of these gifts? We who live, as today's collect says, amongst the "swift and varied changes of this world" have less time than we think.

What are we waiting for? Jesus the Christ will receive whatever it is that we have to offer. He will not turn either us or our gifts away. The Christ and the world await your precious gift, your extravagance of love.