

“Investing in Life”

John 12: 1-8

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What does love smell like? What does it taste like or feel like? What does love sound like? It is amazing how much of our life experiences are connected to our senses. After spending my childhood summers at the beach, whenever I get close to the ocean and can hear the waves crashing and smell that beachy smell, I feel like I am home. When I smell sugar cookies baking I think of Friday nights with my grandmother. I am back in her kitchen, sitting at the table, drinking Bosco and eating warm cookies fresh out of the oven. Scripture invites us to taste and see the goodness of God. Take God within your very being and experience God at a deeper level. We are invited to use all our senses, our whole being, in this life of discipleship.

That is what we experience this morning as we hear this amazing story of Mary’s love for Jesus. She brings her whole self, each one of her senses, to this visceral experience of devotion for Jesus. The story we hear from John’s gospel is one of those pivotal gospel stories. The story of Jesus’ anointing just days before his death is told in some form in all four gospels. Each story differs slightly. Two days before the Passover, in the last week of Jesus’ life, Jesus gathers with his disciples.

In those confusing days just before Jesus’ death, a woman enters their gathering and demonstrates that she understands what is going on far better than any of the men. This woman comes to anoint Jesus. In some stories she anoints his head. In other versions, like the one we hear in John’s gospel she anoints his feet. In either case, this woman declares in this act of anointing that Jesus is the one anointed by God, in other words he is the Christ or the Messiah. Jesus praises this woman’s act and declares that as long as the story is told, it will be told in memory of her.

In John’s gospel, the woman has a name. She is Mary, sister to Martha and Lazarus. Mary anoints Jesus’ feet which as one writer notes, turns this act of prophesy into an act solely of personal and emotional devotion—even an act that could be seen as competing with and undermining ministry to the poor. This is how Judas tries to portray her actions. I don’t believe that is her intention. Mary makes a bold and profound statement by anointing Jesus. She takes great risks to not only demonstrate her personal devotion to him, but to declare to the world that Jesus’ mission is anointed by God. There can be no misunderstanding when she is done that Jesus is God’s chosen one.

This anointing at Bethany, in the home of Lazarus, isn’t just a nice little story in the middle of John’s gospel. It is set at the turning point of the gospel, both literally and figuratively. Jesus has turned his face toward Jerusalem. He knows the future that awaits him there. He knows the authorities are out to get him and he willingly accepts his own death that is to come. His raising of Lazarus from the dead, just a few verses before this passage in chapter 11, has set the authorities off and has put into motion the machinery that will kill Jesus in just a few days. Mary has experienced Jesus’ ministry in a

profoundly personal way. She is not concerned what the authorities are planning to do. Her beloved brother was dead and Jesus has brought him back to life. She is not afraid of what might happen to her as she performs this astounding act of loving kindness. She needs to thank Jesus for all he has done and all he has meant to her and her family.

Mary puts herself in great jeopardy to act as she does. First, she behaves in public, in the presence of other men, in a way that is culturally inappropriate. A woman does not touch a man in such a way, especially a man who is not her husband. Mary breaks open a jar of costly perfume, what you might consider the family treasure, and pours it on Jesus' feet. Then she takes down her hair and lovingly wipes the ointment away. This is a gesture of love and devotion that is unimaginable to most of us. Who among us would take something that costs nearly a year's salary and use it in such a way? Who would make ourselves that vulnerable in the presence of strangers? It seems incredibly foolish and wasteful. The act of devotion is lost on the other disciples. They can not fathom why she would do such a thing. Judas publicly ridicules her.

Mary is not just any devotee of Jesus. She is the sister of Lazarus, the one that Jesus raised from the dead after being in the tomb for four days. He was not metaphorically dead, like the Prodigal Son, he was truly dead. He was not just a little dead, he was really dead. Jesus has been in her home many times. Perhaps the disciples gathered in Lazarus' home to celebrate his miraculous resurrection. Mary appreciates the urgency. Mary sees the connection between her brother's resurrection and the resurrection that Jesus speaks of. Somehow she knows what is about to happen to Jesus. She must seize the moment. When we are profoundly changed by another person's act of mercy, we long to respond in an extravagant way. Mary does not count the cost; emotionally or fiscally of her actions. She simply responds and knows that Jesus will understand.

Sara Dylan Breuer asks "what would it look like if we lived more deeply into the kind of prophetic witness we see in this week's text? How might our lives be different in our households, our worshipping communities, our world if, instead of asking God to bless our activity, we, like Mary, were looking for the ways in which God is acting in the world and looking for ways we could bless and support God's actions?" This is a profoundly important question. In anointing Jesus' feet, Mary was anointing Jesus' actions in the world. She was declaring his work blessed. She was blessing the work that the disciples would be called to continue in Jesus' name when he was no longer with them.

Mary might help us to consider the ways in which we are all called to bless God's ministry in the world. Where and when might you act extravagantly? How might you be a blessing in the name of Jesus to someone else? It is hard to imagine. We struggle with simple acts of generosity like giving away those extra shoes that gather dust in our closet, giving up the extra trip to Starbucks so we can increase our pledge, or deciding to not eat meat on Fridays during Lent as an act of loving devotion (oops, I forgot, that's only for Catholics, right?)

I have seen people in this community act like Mary. Many of you were extraordinarily generous when we decided to undertake our ambitious building project. In so doing we

have anointed Jesus ministry in this community. As we contemplated the capital campaign some people wondered if this was what God was truly calling us to do. Did the world need another 3 million dollar building or could that money be used to support ministries among the poor? I believe the motivations for our concerns were not the same as Judas'. Presumably none of you who raised such concerns are thieves, as Judas turned to be. We asked such questions because we are genuinely concerned for the poor and know that even though a 3 million dollar gift could not take away the suffering of the poor it could nevertheless do a lot of good.

There is an ongoing debate whether or not we need to have churches in order to further Christ's mission and ministry. As many church buildings fall into disrepair and require thousands of dollars annually to keep them running, church folks wonder if we could do things differently. There are some people who believe we have outlived the usefulness of church buildings. Some folks contend we can transform any space into a worship space. The Spirit of God can be present with us no matter where we gather. I believe churches buildings continue to be a part of God's mission. What we do here prepares us to hear God's call and to meet the needs of God's people beyond these walls.

Some times God calls us to make a significant sacrifice in the name of Christ. Other times the sacrifice we make may seem insignificant yet the pay off is beyond our comprehension. We have been taught that the best things in life are free, but they often come at a cost. Our lives, not only our lives of faith, are filled with perplexing paradoxes. This new building may seem like yet another paradox. How can a building increase our faith? How can classrooms and kitchens and elevators help us to be better disciples? Perhaps these are the questions we will continue to ponder long after we have completed this project? Along this sacred journey, many of you have acted like Mary. You have not counted the cost and have responded generously. We will see how that act of generosity transforms this community. Each act of kindness is a way of anointing Jesus. Every gesture of hospitality is a witness to his life, a declaration of your discipleship.

The preacher Kate Huey says, "I can only wonder then about our own hearts and our own giving, our hearts broken open to one another and to the world God loves...those moments when a gesture of love and generosity transforms a situation – a generous spirit that offers forgiveness and healing, a spirit of kindness that offers healing and hope and speaks words of encouragement, a spirit of freedom that gives out of the abundance we live in so that others have enough to live. This woman, even in the face of criticism, held nothing back, not the most expensive gift she could give and not the gift of her own breaking heart, full of love. This woman, so full of love, is our teacher today. She helps us to recognize who Jesus is, and who we are called to be as his faithful followers."

We are on our way to Jerusalem. We can not keep the end from coming. Mary has prepared her beloved Jesus for the rest of the journey. We too must go. This was Mary's moment to show her love and devotion to Jesus. We will have our own opportunities, this week, next month and in unexpected moments in the years ahead. The invitation is to have a full body experience of grace, to be extravagant and give everything you have to

Jesus. Your acts of generosity and love are an investment in life, a life worth living.
Mary teaches us that nothing is too costly when it comes to loving Jesus. Amen

Sources:

Kate Huey, Sermon for Lent 5/C, John 12: 1-8, From SAMUEL, preaching resource for the UCC, March 21, 2010.

Sara Dylan Breuer, Dylan's Lectionary Blog, Lent 5/C, 2007