



“Makes Perfect Sense”

Scripture – John 12:1-8

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Randall T. Clayton

Sunday, April 6, 2025

As a result of political turmoil and persecution, Babette was banished from Paris and migrated to a small Danish fishing village. There she got a job working in a little religious community as a housekeeper and cook. Her employers were two elderly sisters whose father had founded the religious community decades earlier. Over time, the religious community had become very tiny. It was beset now by bickering and quarrels. Although she was a talented chef, Babette prepared the bland meals that her employers wanted for years on end. One day, however, she discovered that she had won a lottery back in Paris and for the first time now she had the opportunity to fulfill a dream – to return finally to Paris and work as a chef in one of the best restaurants in the world. Upon learning she suddenly had some resources she offered to cook a feast for the community. After getting them to agree (which took some doing) she prepared a meal full of rare delicacies, excellent wines, loading the table up with some of the best gourmet food in the world. It was a meal like the community had never, ever had.

If my memory of the movie, *Babette's Feast*¹, is accurate, at the end of the meal, a community that had been born apart by their bickering and sniping and arguments had come together. Conflicts had been put to bed. Past misdeeds had been forgiven. As the last of the dessert and wine was consumed under the stars that night, the little community began to sing in harmony, “Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise God all creatures here below.”

The healing of the community was a direct result of Babette’s having liberally poured out her love on them.

It didn’t take long for the people though to realize just how liberally she had poured out her love. You see, Babette had spent all her money, every single dime of her winnings, on that meal for the community that had been her home for so many years. In so doing, however, she had forfeited the options for her future. Having used all her money on the meal she would never again have the funds to be able to return to Paris and never become a chef at a leading restaurant. Spending everything she had on that meal for her

¹ *Babette's Feast*, directed by Gabriel Axel (1987; Denmark: Danish Film Institute, Nordisk Films, Walter Manly Enterprises).

community made no sense, right? Or, maybe it made perfect sense if you really care about others, and your community, and if you love Jesus.²

Love doesn't always make logical sense. Love may not better our bottom line. Love won't enrich our bank accounts or our endowments either. Love won't help us make it to the front of the pack or the top of the heap; and yet, it is love in which hope lies, love that brings joy, love that can make hurting communities whole. It is love which may enable us to journey faithfully through in the darkest days of our lives, even when the world around us seems to be on the verge of collapse, even when we see the leaders of nations taking actions that are anything but loving, anything but in line with Gospel values. Which brings us to the story you just heard from John's Gospel.

All four Gospels record an anointing of Jesus, though told differently. It is only in John's story that the anointer is specifically named. Here, she's not identified as a "sinful woman" as the anointer is in Luke's version, nor is she unnamed as in Matthew and Mark's version. Here, she's identified as Mary, who has a sister named Martha, and a brother named Lazarus.

In Matthew, Mark and Luke, the anointer puts the aromatic oil, the perfume, on Jesus' head, as if they were crowning him king—that's where the oil went for the coronation of a king, on the head. In John's story, however the precious perfume is poured on Jesus' feet, which is where oil goes if you are anointing a corpse for burial.

In the other accounts, the anointing takes place at the home of Simon the Leper, but in John, it takes place at Lazarus' house. And remember Lazarus? The sisters had sent for Jesus when their brother got very sick. Jesus got detained and arrived at Lazarus' house after Lazarus had died. Lovingly, Jesus then resuscitated him.

As today's story begins, it is six days before Passover, and Jesus is at Lazarus' house enjoying a meal with Mary, Martha, and the once-dead-but-now-very-much-alive man. Perhaps that meal was a celebration of Lazarus' resuscitated new life. Maybe it was a meal to give thanks for what Jesus had done for Lazarus and for the love Jesus had shown them all.

In the context of this meal Mary took an alabaster bottle filled with about 1 ½ cups of a precious aromatic oil called spikenard. Grown only in the cold rocky ground of the Himalayas, spikenard was incredibly expensive. It's estimated that the contents of Mary's bottle were worth an entire year's salary for a worker. Perhaps she had inherited that bottle, maybe it was her dowry, or perhaps she had scrimped and saved for decades to buy it to use in the future to anoint the body of a deceased close relative upon their burial. However she acquired it, that night she poured all of it out on Jesus' feet...not on his head as if she were crowning him king, but on his feet, as if she were anointing his body for burial, as if he was already dead.

If you had been sitting at that table in a room now filled with the fragrance of that perfume, you would have been aghast. What was Mary thinking? It was such a waste. But it wasn't just the wastefulness that might have shocked you, it was also what happened once the oil hit Jesus' feet. Mary let down her hair, something women didn't do in front of a man who wasn't her husband in those days. And then Mary bent

² Hoezee, Scott, "Sermon Commentary for Sunday, March 13, 2016, John 12:1-9", Calvin Theological Seminary.

down touched Jesus' feet, something else a woman wouldn't do to a man who wasn't her husband - a rather intimate act even today. If all of that didn't knock you off your seat, Mary proceeded to use her own hair to wash his feet with the oil that she had liberally poured on them. What she did would have made no sense to anyone watching. And yet, clearly it made all the sense in the world to Mary and to Jesus too.

Jesus and Mary were dear friends. She cared about Jesus as Jesus cared about her. She loved him. She was grateful for his friendship and care for her, and thankful for the love and grace Jesus had given in resuscitating her brother Lazarus. She could have said a simple "thank you," but Mary knew that real love issues forth in actions not just proclamations.

Also motivating her act, prophetic Mary realized that Jesus would not end up on a gilded throne, wearing a bejeweled crown. Mary realized he wasn't going to command an army and overthrow the Romans. Mary knew what perhaps no one else but Jesus really knew - that his love meant that he would be crushed, killed. He had stood up for those the empire pushed down. He welcomed those the powers-that-be refused to welcome. He fed the hungry, never asking where they hailed from or where they were born. He forgave those people that the religious people thought were unforgiveable. He partied with those who polite people kept away from at all costs. And he never asked if anyone deserved to be healed - he simply healed those who came near.

Mary knew this sort of love is not welcomed very often in the halls of power because it threatens to upend a status quo in which those with powerful use their power to enrich themselves, and to reward the haves at the expense of the have-nots. There was a bounty of Jesus' head. Mary knew that. She saw the forces aligning against Jesus. He would not be alive long. Loving Jesus, and knowing he was a dead-man-walking at that point, she decided not to wait until his body was in the tomb to anoint the corpse, but to show her love and care for him that night, to respond to his love with her own extravagant loving, caring action.

To Mary, and to Jesus, her actions made all the sense in the world. But not Judas. "What about the poor," Judas wanted to know as he saw Mary break the bottle and empty it. "Why would you waste such expensive perfume when there are hungry mouths just outside the door?" Judas asked. A bucket of water was a lot cheaper than expensive perfume. And a towel would have been a lot more dignified than her hair.

Jesus shut down Judas' complaint, telling him to leave her alone. He knew Judas didn't actually care about the poor. And then, assuming that the Greek is intended here to be read as a command and not a description, Jesus continued saying, "Have the poor always with you, for you won't always have me. She brought this perfume for my burial." Recognizing that his days were numbered, I believe he was moved by her expression of love that night. Mary's action made perfect sense to Jesus considering what was to come.

As Jesus walked that lonesome valley of denial of those closest to him, betrayal, arrest, sham trial, conviction, scourging, and cross, I wonder if the memory of what Mary did that night, along with the lingering aroma of the perfume on his body, helped Jesus bear the nightmare of what the next days would bring. As one commentator writes, "Mary's extravagant love for Jesus makes it possible for Jesus to show extravagant love in what follows—washing the feet of his disciples, handing himself over to be arrested

in the garden, carrying his own cross, dying, rising, and ascending. Mary loves Jesus into his future as a fulfillment of [the words we find earlier in John's Gospel], 'for God so loved the world.'"³

She continues, "I think Jesus took Mary's love with him into Jerusalem. I think he acted out her love when he washed the feet of his disciples, especially when he washed the feet of Judas about to betray him and Peter who would deny him. I think he felt once again Mary's love, her gentle touch, when he was beaten. I think he held on to Mary's love, desperately, when he hung on that cross...And I think Jesus took all of that love into the tomb, all of that love that would then love him into his future as the resurrection and the life."⁴

Mary poured out her love for Jesus, and I have to believe that her love made Jesus' road easier to bear.

All of this then makes me wonder, how is it that we show our love for Jesus today given what's going on all around us? Will we choose Mary's way, a way that aligned itself with Jesus? Or will we choose to go the way of Judas, which is also the way of the empire?

Judas aligned himself with the empire and its death dealing desires, which seek to divide and destroy. Judas didn't care if anyone got hurt by his actions. I mean he stole from the common purse and then traded Jesus' life for 30 pieces of silver. As long as he was OK it was fine. I doubt he was ever willing to give of himself, to share what he had. As with empires, Judas was about taking, and getting, and holding on at all costs while criticizing the one who showed love and kindness.

Mary, on the other hand, aligned herself with Jesus, and thus with love. She trusted that there would be enough for the future, so she didn't have to be stingy in the present. She was willing to pour out what she had, as Jesus poured out his life. She was willing to care for someone, even though it seemed scandalous to some. She cared for Jesus, a man that the political and religious authorities had branded a criminal, even though none of his actions had not violated any laws at all. She loved the one who stood on the side of the poor and marginalized. She loved the one the powerful deemed a threat because of his love. Her love probably made no sense to much the world, certainly not the powerful and well to do, but love made perfect sense to Mary...and to Jesus too.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son."⁵ Jesus so loves us that he gave his life up. Mary so loved Jesus that she poured out all that she had in love and compassion. None of this likely makes sense in the world's eyes, or in empire's eyes either, but for those who love Jesus it makes perfect sense to pour out our lives for others. It makes perfect sense to share liberally, to work tirelessly not just for our own good, but for the good of all of God's children across the globe. It makes perfect sense to welcome and care for the least among us and to give dignity to all of God's children. This is the way of Jesus. It is the way of Mary. But it is not the way of Judas, and it isn't usually the way of empire. Which will we choose at this pivotal moment in our own history? The way of Judas and empire? The way of Mary and Jesus?

³ Lewis, Karoline, "Loved into the Future," April 1, 2019, dearworkingpreacher blog, April 1, 2019.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ John 3:16, New Revised Standard Version.

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