

*Holy God, send Your Word, send Your Spirit, send Your love. Amen.*

I ended last week’s sermon talking about prom dresses, and I’m still there. Prom dresses are pretty frivolous. In the hierarchy of human needs, party clothes are pretty far down the scale, way after food, shelter, security, education... And we are not starting a prom dress ministry; are exploring ways to reach out to young people who may lack stable housing, or family, or life circumstance. Yet, how do we discern God’s invitations? How do we detect evidence of God? We look for abundance. We look to see where there is energy. We now have an abundance of some 250 prom gowns in La Plata. Where are we seeing an uptick of energy in creating beautiful opportunities to let young people know they are beautiful. It looks frivolous as can be. And yet, God is up to something. And that makes it profound.

Mary of Bethany, in our gospel reading today, commits an act that looks utterly frivolous, ridiculous, extravagant, wasteful – she gets up from the dinner table, pours a whole jar of oil of nard on Jesus’ feet and wipes them with her hair. Nard is made from an herb, the spikenard plant; it was very precious and fragrant, and one used only a little bit at a time. But Mary used the whole jar. She was not afraid to be wasteful, or intimate, embarrassing, jeopardizing her reputation and Jesus’, angering his disciples. Mary seems to know something that the others in this story don’t want to see – that time with Jesus is growing short, that his life on this earth is growing short. In defending her use of this precious ointment, Jesus says,  
*“She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial,”*  
but she doesn’t keep it till then. She uses it now, all of it, holds nothing back, almost as though she knows that the real waste would be to use it on a body that is not going to stay dead.

Life and death are all intermingled in this story.

This dinner party at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus takes place after Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead, and after that, the Jewish leaders decided Jesus had to be killed before he got any more popular and risked exposing the whole community to the wrath of the Romans. Here you have this man who was dead but is now alive, having dinner with a guy who’s alive, but soon to be dead... and then alive again.

And amid all the life of dinner among friends, there is this reference to burial rites – and lurking at the edges of the scene, betrayal, in Judas' increasing disgust. Judas condemns Mary's act as wasteful, but is love shown ever wasteful? Mary shows her devotion to Jesus in the most extravagant way she knows, and she gives all, all of a jar of very expensive, pure, undiluted nard. She goes for it, in an act of extravagant worship, because she loves Jesus.

What, or who, do we love that much? That we'd give it all for?  
How might we come to love Jesus that much? That's the real question.

When we love Jesus that much, the rest of our life falls into place.

It doesn't become easier, but much richer and more joy-filled.

And how do we come to love Jesus that much? By responding to his love,  
By letting him love us, allowing his love in.

This act of worship on Mary's part is a rehearsal of a greater gift to come. On the eve of the Passover, Jesus will gather at dinner with his friends, and like Mary, he will get up from the table and kneel at their feet, washing their feet, to their huge discomfort.

They didn't want their Lord washing their feet, any more than many of us will want our fellow parishioners washing our feet on Maundy Thursday – But Jesus said, "If you don't let me do this for you, you cannot know my love." When we're not willing to receive love, we're not able to fully give it.

And we have to be in relationship with Jesus to feel the love.

Just knowing about it can't make us fall in love in return.

That's what our Way of Love practices are designed to open us to.

And that is what we need, to fall in love with Jesus. Just like when we fall in love with anyone, we think about them all the time, they seem to show up everywhere. I once had a whirlwind romance and I ran into this guy constantly during that time, on the subway, on the street.

It felt like the universe was bringing us together.

Well, the universe is bringing us together with Jesus.

We hear about this person, how wonderful he is, how lovable many find him.

We start to set aside time to be with him – in worship, in prayer, in ministry.

We start to run into him in unexpected places – and all the places he said he could be found – In His Word, at His table, in our prayer times, among his followers. And we run into him in places of hurt and need.

Jesus may have said “You will always have the poor with you,”  
but he didn’t mean that as license to ignore the poor.  
Rather, he says quite explicitly in another conversation that when we lavish  
our resources on the poor, we ARE taking care of him. We are loving him.  
In the poor is one place we can be guaranteed to find Jesus.

Where do you encounter Jesus? Do you notice? Do you respond?  
We worship a God who wants us to know Her, to know Him.  
That’s the radical thing Jesus came to say, to show, to live: God is near.  
And God’s people are to draw near in love. Jesus has given us access.  
Mary figured that out. She knew it in her gut, and she let her instinct for worship  
take her across that room, to his feet, to break open that very expensive  
alabaster jar and let that costly ointment pour and pour and pour out all over  
him, filling the house with its strong perfume.  
She knew the time to offer the gift was now. Not later. Now.

Jesus invites us to come too, to offer ourselves extravagantly. Our everything.  
When you come to this table this morning, offer yourself.  
Let our offering fill this place like that perfume filled Mary’s house.

Next Sunday we begin our annual pilgrimage to the Cross,  
to know Christ in his death so we may better know His life.  
Don’t hold yourself away from our worship – don’t stand back like bystanders,  
just coming Easter morning. Draw near.  
Come close, to the awfulness and the breathtaking beauty, both.

Ten days from now, we will gather in the parish hall at Christ Church to mark  
Jesus’ last night on earth, the beginning of his suffering and death for us.  
Come to that table and offer yourself in humility and faith.  
You don’t have to, but I hope you will allow someone to wash your feet –  
that’s harder for many than washing.  
And then give someone else that gift of extravagant care after a hard day,  
hard week, hard life, that Mary gave Jesus. It is a way to connect with him.

It began here, with Mary’s gift. Jesus commended her extravagance.  
He will honor the gifts we bring Him. He will rejoice in our love.  
And he will love us into wholeness.  
*I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? Amen.*

John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 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. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (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.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Philippians 3:4b-14

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Isaiah 43:19-20

Do not remember the former things,  
or consider the things of old.  
I am about to do a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
I will make a way in the wilderness  
and rivers in the desert.