



SAINT LUKE'S

**“A DEVELOPED HEART”
THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT
YEAR C**

**ISAIAH 43:16-21
PSALM 126
PHILIPPIANS 3:4B-14
JOHN 12:1-8**

**A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY
APRIL 7, 2019**

There is something in this gospel story that goes to the heart of life. The extravagance of an unnamed woman anointing Jesus' head is a story we hear in Matthew and Mark,¹ and scholars have often assumed the woman was Mary Magdalene who has a colorful past. Here in John, we *know* who the woman is - she is Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. This family are close friends of Jesus. He is in their home often. Most incredibly, Jesus has raised their brother Lazarus from the grave and Lazarus is at the dinner table with them. This is the same Mary who sits at Jesus feet² listening while busy Martha says: Lord, please get my sister Mary to help me in the kitchen instead of just sitting there listening to you. True to form, here Martha is once again serving. But serious, studious, quiet, attentive Mary is transformed. Mary acts in a way that could indeed be confused with a Mary Magdalene, a so-called "loose woman". Mary pours out her love for Jesus by anointing his feet with expensive, aromatic ointment. It is (spike)nard ointment. Spikenard doesn't grow in Palestine - it grows on the Himalayan mountains. The nard is imported from the region of what is now India. Mary's ointment is estimated to be worth 300 denarii: a year's salary for a laborer. Something that pricey should be kept for big events, and was

¹ Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9

² Luke 10:38-42

customarily used in preparing a body for burial. Washing feet with water is a gesture of hospitality, but anointing feet with oil is...wasteful, says at least one of the disciples. Judas is identified as the speaker, but I expect others were thinking the same thing.

Jesus understands immediately that Mary's reverence and anointing is a sacramental act. Some commentators suggest Mary anoints Jesus out of pure gratitude for Jesus' raising of her brother Lazarus, and not because Mary sees prophetically what will happen to Jesus. Either way, Jesus understands and affirms it. Mary is anointing his body early for burial. Even as God's extravagant love in Jesus will reveal itself, Jesus embraces expansive response to God.

One of my favorite authors is E.M. Forster. In his essay *Notes on the English character* says that the English measure out their emotions like potatoes.³ When I first read Forster's words when I was 17 or so, I knew exactly what he meant. As I experienced England growing up, the acceptable emotional bandwidth was very narrow. Excess emotion was not considered appropriate or encouraged. One should not be too happy, not too sad, not too enthusiastic, and not too passionate, just not too emotional about anything.

³ *Notes on the English character*: E.M. Forster

Forster diagnoses the cause of this national malaise as fear of emotion and the result is an “undeveloped heart”. I was always an energetic enthusiast by temperament, and one of the things I always loved about America is the positive, can-do energy embedded in the DNA of this country. Forster provokes a question for all of us, not only the people of 20th Century England. Do we measure out our love and devotion to God and neighbor like potatoes? Meagerly, guardedly, stingily; as though if we spend it, serve it up, there will be nothing left. It will run out.

Mary surprises everyone with her extravagant, unmeasured action. We are not told that Mary’s family criticizes her action, but Jesus’ disciples do. Jesus defends Mary’s lavishness. Jesus is often a defender of the defenseless and persecuted, especially women. Leave her alone. Step back from your judgment and condemnation. This is a caution for us too. We do tend to judge. We assess and evaluate and find wanting. Even if we don’t say anything, we think judgmental thoughts. We make assumptions about the motivations of others. Assumptions or pre-judgements aren’t just bad news for others, they are bad news for us too. Our heads and hearts can get very cramped in their thinking patterns.

It is easy to smirk knowingly at ideals and generosity of heart, imputing it to other, self-serving motives. It

is easy to be cynical about the open-handed gesture. Goodness is so easy to undermine and deride. When we show extravagant devotion, sadness, praise, compassion, enthusiasm, it doesn't mean we don't care about anyone or anything else. It just means that for that moment, our whole being is filled with tender loving concern for the one. Like the good shepherd with the lost sheep.⁴ Like the father with the prodigal son.⁵ The Bible is full of whole-hearted, extravagant love – which doesn't run out because it is spent so fully on the one.

There is nothing wrong with Mary and her extravagance doesn't mean she doesn't care about the poor. There will always be people in need of our love and attention. *You always have the poor with you*, Jesus says. Opportunities to honor and serve those in need are omnipresent. But sometimes something unique, something wonderful, is going by, and the moment to cherish it is fleeting. We need to stop, cherish, and honor when we have the chance.

Our youthful high ideals and single-minded dedication, our lofty goals can be worn down or burned out of us as we age. Here Jesus holds space for all those noblest desires and impulses, our yearning

⁴ *Matthew 18:12-14; Luke 15:3-7*

⁵ *Luke 15:11-32*

to serve the highest purpose in our lives. In Mary, Jesus welcomes, defends and honors our offerings and says: thank you. I get it. I get *you*. Jesus doesn't make fun of people's gifts, hopes and dreams. Ever. I love that about him. Jesus rebukes those who do: back off, stop it. Don't judge from your own confined, constrained and cramped hearts. Every tender-hearted impulse finds refuge and shelter, and Jesus whispers Yes; your ideals, your gifts and offerings are holy.

Jesus: defender of the passionate, all-in, immoderate approach to life and love; of faithfulness over winning at all costs; of striving and trying over success; of the person in the arena over the armchair critic.

AMEN

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