

Lent 5C 2022 Sermon

John, Chapter 11 – the story of the raising of Lazarus

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."

Today, we are back in John's Gospel, wherein Jesus speaks truths about the **Spiritual** World, and his listeners (with a few notable exceptions) *hear* Jesus' words on the level of the **physical** world, repeatedly missing Jesus' meaning.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is at a meal in the house of Martha, Mary, and their brother Lazarus, whom Jesus has just raised from the dead (as described in the Chapter just preceding today's Gospel). It is just six days before the Passover, when Jesus will be crucified. Mary comes and kneels at Jesus' feet and symbolically pours out her deep love, her very being, to Jesus, in a sacramental offering of costly perfume.

Now, Judas, one of Jesus' disciples who is also at the meal, objects to this wastefulness, saying, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" But John tells us readers of his Gospel that Judas said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse for the Disciples and used to steal what was put into it.

All deceitfulness and treachery aside, Judas completely misses the spiritual gift that Mary offers. He reduces the fragrant offering of love to dollars and cents. "He does not discern the spiritual," writes John Shea; "he knows only what he can count. This lack of spiritual sensitivity means he cannot receive Jesus..."¹

But, if you're at all like me, you may have this niggling thought at the back of your mind: "You know, Judas has a point. Pouring out that expensive oil on Jesus' feet is a total waste of money that could have been used for the poor."

Now, the perfume called "nard" comes from the spikenard plant, which only grows naturally in the Himalayan mountains at an altitude between 10,000 and

16,000 feet.² No wonder it was so expensive! And, one denarii was one day's wage for the average worker of Jesus' time; so it would take the average laborer 300 days to earn the money to buy that perfume. Figuring the equivalent amount of money at **today's** minimum wage, the cost of this perfume would amount to almost \$30,000. \$30,000.

Now, it has been said that if you want to get to the bottom of something corrupt, you should "follow the money." And that is certainly true in regard to Judas. But I want to suggest that we can discover some deep truths in John's Gospel if we obey the directive, "Follow the smell." Follow the smell.

At the beginning of today's Gospel, John tells us that Jesus came to "the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead." John isn't in the habit of arbitrarily throwing extraneous bits of information into his stories, so we should understand that there is a link between the story of Lazarus being raised from the dead (found in Chapter 11 of John's Gospel) and today's Gospel story (which begins Chapter 12). John Shea tells us that these 2 stories – the story of Lazarus being raised from the dead and the story of Mary anointing Jesus' feet – cannot be separated; they belong together and "mutually interpret one another."³

You may remember that, in the story of Lazarus being raised from the dead, the sisters Mary and Martha, who live in Bethany, just outside of Jerusalem, had sent a message to Jesus (who was at the time in Galilee, a long ways away), saying, "Lord, he whom you love [meaning their brother Lazarus] is ill." But when Jesus received the message, he said to his disciples, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." And John tells us that though Jesus loved Martha and Mary and Lazarus, after hearing that Lazarus is ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. (Read John, Chapter 11)

To make a long story short, Jesus dallies, and when he finally arrives at Bethany, he discovers that Lazarus has been buried in a tomb for four days. Jesus tells the bystanders to roll back the stone covering the entrance to the tomb; but Martha objects, saying, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days."

Now, just as an aside, early this past week, **I** began to smell an offensive odor when I walked out the front door of my house. At first, I thought, "Some small animal probably died somewhere; the odor will pass in a day or two." But the odor kept getting stronger. It was a pervasive stench that you could smell from almost a block away. I investigated, and found that a deer had crawled under the junipers in my front yard and died.

The powerful stench of death is fresh in my memory.

Well, you know how the story of Lazarus' death ends: Jesus, standing outside Lazarus' tomb, calls in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" And John tells us, "The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'" Unbind him, let him go. It's a powerful foreshadowing of Jesus' death and resurrection.

And now, a few verses later, in *today's* Gospel story, we see Lazarus, risen from the dead, seated in his own home at the dinner table with Jesus, his sisters, and some of the disciples. And Mary comes up to Jesus and anoints his feet with this incredibly costly perfume, wiping his feet with her hair. And John tells us, "The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume." One day, the cloying stench of death; the next day, the heavenly fragrance of a whole pound of costly perfume. "She has done this to prepare me for the day **I** will be placed in a tomb," Jesus says. (*God's Word* translation) John wants us to see that, in lovingly pouring out a whole pound of outrageously expensive perfume on Jesus' feet, *Mary anticipates Jesus* pouring out his *life*, in love, on the cross.

And there's more. Fast-forward 6 days, to the Passover, (which John ties to today's Gospel story by mentioning, at the beginning, that it was "6 days before the Passover"), and we see Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus taking the dead body of Jesus and wrapping it in linen cloths along with **100 pounds** of myrrh and aloes. 100 pounds! If the **one** pound of perfume that Mary pours over Jesus' feet "fills the house with fragrance," just imagine the fragrance in Jesus' tomb when he is anointed with 100 pounds of myrrh and aloes!

Clearly, anointing a body with 100 pounds of fragrance does not compute; and that's exactly John's point: He doesn't *want* us to "compute" this; doesn't want us to even try to analyze it or understand it. We are to *smell* it, and be overwhelmed.

Scientists tell us that our sense of smell is more closely linked to our emotions and memories than any other sense. People are 100 times more likely to remember something they smell over something they hear, see, or touch.⁴ Smell and emotion are stored as one memory.⁵ To this day, whenever I smell red cabbage cooked with vinegar and bacon, I am transported back to my grandparent's apartment in Chicago at Thanksgiving time. I'm sure you can attest to your own emotions and memories tied to smells.

My friends, we are so used to **hearing** Bible stories and processing them with our minds; it doesn't dawn on us that a story might be told that is meant to engage our sense of smell, that most advanced of all our senses, the only sense that is fully developed in our womb; that sense which dominates our perceptions until we reach the age of 10, when the sense of sight takes over.⁵ But I want to suggest to you that we miss the full meaning of John's story of Jesus' last days if we do not engage our sense of smell; if we do not smell the stench of death at Lazarus'

tomb, or the fragrance that filled the room when the resurrected Lazarus is seated at table the next day and his sister anoints Jesus' feet with a pound of costly nard, or the impossibly powerful scent of 100 pounds of myrrh and aloes filling Jesus' tomb, totally overcoming any possible scent of death with the sweet, spicy fragrance of heaven. Smell and emotion are stored as one memory. The fragrance of nard will linger on Mary's hair for days afterward, carrying with it the emotions of love and grief. The fragrance of 100 pounds of myrrh and aloes will cling to the bodies of Nicodemus and Joseph for days after they bury Jesus.

The old hymn asks us, "Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?" "Can you not smell it?" John asks us. That sweet, spicy, overpowering smell of 100 pounds of myrrh and aloes, an unmistakable promise, still clinging in our emotions and memories, that death does not have the final word?

AMEN

1 John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, p. 102

2 "Spikenard," at *Wikipedia*:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spikenard#:~:text=Spikenard%2C%20also%20called%20nard%2C%20nardin,Nepal%2C%20China%2C%20and%20India>.

3 Shea, *ibid.*, p. 98

4 Michael Keenan, Nov 1, 2021, "Harnessing The Power Of Aroma: How Scent Advertising Works For Retailers," Shopify, <https://www.shopify.com/retail/scent-marketing>

5 *The Harvard Gazette*, Colleen Walsh, "What the nose knows," February 27, 2020 <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/02/how-scent-emotion-and-memory-are-intertwined-and-exploited/>