

Montague Pastoral Charge

Apr. 6, 2025 – Fifth Sunday in Lent

John 12:1-8

Sermon: “The Treasure”

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A few years ago, a friend and I were finishing up our final years of postsecondary education at the same time. It had been a long and demanding stretch of schooling, and we decided that we should both mark this turning point in our lives by treating ourselves to something special, something we would not normally buy – something that would be appropriate for two young men who could really feel like grown-ups now. So we each decided to buy a bottle of really fine cologne. A couple of hundred dollars later, there we were sitting in my parents’ living room and comparing our purchases. Eagerly, I tested out a bit of his selection: Penhaligon’s *English Fern*. Just a drop or two, he said, that was all you needed. So I carefully put a couple of drops on my wrist, no more, rubbed it into my neck, and breathed in deeply the beautiful scent. Incidentally, this is how the official Penhaligon’s website describes *English Fern*: “a gorgeous fresh and earthy fragrance that is both elegant and sensual, with head notes of geranium and lavender, heart notes of clover, base notes of patchouli, sandalwood and oak moss.” We sat back and basked in our own classiness. Just then the back door opened and my father came in. Before he had so much as closed the door behind him, he took just one whiff of the air and exclaimed, “Why does it smell like old men in here?”

A couple of drops – that was all it took to fill the house. I think of that first foray into men’s fragrance whenever I read the story of the anointing of Jesus. The text says “the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment.” And Mary had a full *pound* of the precious oil. In the parallel story in the Gospel of Mark, the woman actually breaks the jar of oil and pours out every drop onto Jesus. John doesn’t go quite far in his version; he doesn’t tell us just how much nard Mary used, but judging by how upset Judas was, we can be sure that it was more than a few drops.

Mary is wasteful – extravagantly wasteful, no doubt about it. The average worker’s wage in Jesus’ time was one denarius per day, and this ointment was worth three hundred – that’s close to a whole year’s pay. Yet Mary pours it over Jesus’ feet: tired, sweaty feet which would only get filthy again the next morning. So, naturally, when the heady scent of the perfume fills the house, Judas doesn’t smell its beauty, he smells billows of money wafting away, money which could have been put to a hundred better uses. “Why was it not sold, and the money given to the poor?”

But it gets worse: it isn’t just the amount of oil that’s wasteful – it’s Mary’s whole attitude. She is down on the floor at Jesus’ feet, her hair hanging down – a position that was appropriate only for either a bride or a prostitute. She rubs the oil in with her hands and wipes it with her hair, as everyone looks on uncomfortably. It’s a posture of the utmost intimacy, love, even submission. It isn’t just her wealth that is poured out at Jesus’ feet, but also her dignity. We can’t blame Judas for being uncomfortable. It seems *too* intimate, a kind of emotional wastefulness that’s almost indecent to behold.

Now, the gospel-writer is quick to condemn Judas. He tells us that Judas didn't actually care about the poor, he was a thief and wanted the money for himself. Maybe, but in fairness to Judas, we should remember that John was writing long after Judas died, and he wasn't inside Judas's head that day; it's possible that John is just venting his bitterness here against the one who betrayed Jesus. Either way, Judas's objection makes perfect sense, and we can just as easily imagine it coming from the lips of one of the more respectable disciples like Peter or John. How can Mary be so wasteful – so prodigal?

And we in the church are wasteful like Mary, aren't we? It's one of the oldest and most pernicious criticisms of the church that we often spend more money and effort on preserving our buildings and beautifying our liturgy than on serving the needy. How familiar is that person who points a finger at us and says, "If you were real Christians you would sell your church and use that money to make a real difference. You would be on the streets with the vulnerable, not hiding in your Sunday morning club, spending money on roofs and heating and music and candles." A character in a Marilyn Robison novel comes into a church for the first time and is bewildered and irritated at these Christians who "waste candles on daylight." In every generation the charge of hypocrisy hits us hard.

It hits us hard because it's at least partly true. I was travelling in Poland years ago and had the opportunity to go to the monastery of Jasna Góra in the city of Częstochowa. Jasna Góra is one of the most popular Christian pilgrimage sites in Europe. It's the home of many of Poland's religious treasures, including the famous painting of the Black Madonna, which they say has been involved in many miracles. When you go inside the monastery it's dazzling. Ornate carvings and lavish colours strike your eye from every angle. There's gold wherever you look: gold paint, gold statues, gold chalices and vestments... Every year millions of pilgrims come to pray there in the midst of this extravagant beauty. Many pilgrims choose to walk there, and lots of devout home-owners are happy to give the travellers a bed for little or no fee. It seems like the form of Christian hospitality. But some of the locals disagree. They see how many pilgrims scurry past the grim, industrial side of the city in their haste to get to the monastery, how they clog the city's transit, and how, because of the hospitality of the people giving free accommodations, the pilgrims end up spending little money to support the local economy. Money gets poured into the coffers of the church, while the community outside gets shortchanged.

It's the old extravagance again, and it's not just Polish Catholics. Our architecture, our symbols, our music – whether it's tuning the organ pipes or buying new amps for the praise band – whichever way the church does it, sometimes it all seems a bit too much. Is it not the same Jesus that Mary anointed who also said to sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor? How do we reconcile those two sides of Jesus? We like to think of Jesus as the great whistle-blower against hypocrisy, but was he himself a hypocrite? Yes, we can say that our liturgy is an offering to God, but that can never quite silence the question that has been echoing down stained-glass halls since the time of Judas. Why was this not sold and the money given to the poor? Maybe God doesn't want extravagant gifts; maybe God doesn't want beautiful organ music or silver chalices. And what about the human cost – the time and energy spent in the service of the church, when there is so much else we could be doing?

It's something I think about as I get ready to be ordained. I was all set to keep doing research in immunology when I decided to enter ministry – and then, halfway through theology

school a global pandemic hit and the whole world was suddenly talking immunology. Was I doing the right thing, or wasting the little measure of talent I had been given? It's not just clergy, either; it's all of us who offer our time and money and energy to the work of the church. I've seen people who give the better part of their lives, whether it's working on committees, leading the music, fixing the plumbing...often thankless jobs that few people even seem to notice. What are we doing here? Will God thank us for taking our talents and throwing them away on the unlikely dream of an ageing church? We're as wasteful with ourselves as Mary was. And was it necessary? Two drops of perfume on the wrist, rubbed around the neck – that would have been enough to fill the house.

But Jesus treasures Mary's gift. He treasures it more dearly than she could ever have expected. In the version from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus says, "She has done a beautiful thing for me...wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her." And here we are doing just that. We just read John's version, and John doesn't include that line. But John doesn't need to tell it, because he *shows* us; he shows exactly how much Jesus treasures Mary's gift. We see it in the very next chapter of John's gospel: remember what happens next? The setting is the upper room and the Passover is at hand. Jesus rises from the table, takes off his clothes, and wraps himself with a simple linen towel. He pours water into a basin and before the disciples know what's happening he is down at their feet, almost indecently, just like Mary was, washing them and wiping them with the towel he is wearing.

That's how much Jesus values Mary's gift – he values it so much that he imitates it. Mary knelt before him in a posture of total self-offering; she laid down at Jesus' feet all her treasure, all her status, all her worldly dignity. When Jesus washes his disciples' feet, he does the same, and so he exalts Mary's gift. It even becomes a command: Jesus says, "If I then, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." That moment is the climax of John's Gospel; when the Son of God kneels down in extravagant humility and wipes his friends' feet.

Mary, Martha, and Lazarus: Jesus loved this strange family from Bethany, and for us they're a sort of microcosm, a little picture of what happens when God's love lives in human hearts. Each member of the family foreshadows something about Jesus – each of them shares his story, and helps to tell it. Mary anoints Jesus' feet and wipes them, just as Jesus would wash the disciples' feet. Mary's brother Lazarus, raised from the dead, points ahead to Jesus' own resurrection. As for Martha, the text simply says, "Martha served." She prepares a meal for Jesus. That might seem like nothing extraordinary, but Jesus will glorify that act of service too. Remember the very last scene of John's Gospel, by the Sea of Galilee. The disciples are fishing on a chilly morning, the wind is blowing, and the risen Jesus appears on the shore. And Jesus, just like Martha, *serves* – he serves them breakfast, bread and fish cooked over a charcoal fire, the first feast of the Messianic Kingdom.

Nothing is given in vain. Jesus treasures every gift. He takes everything they offer him and it becomes part of His glory, his glory which is God's story of costly, prodigal love. Jesus breathes sacramental meaning into whatever is laid before him, he glorifies it and exalts it. And the fragrance fills the whole house of God.

God treasures all our gifts. That may mean our whole lives – in fact, it certainly *does* mean our whole lives, whether we happen to be preachers or lawyers or housewives or farmers or retirees...If we will be called Christians, if we will truly witness God's costly love to the

world, we will give all that we have. And whatever form our ministry takes, every day of it God will cherish, just as Jesus cherishes every drop of ointment that has fallen on the floor.

A friend once came to me with some trepidation, and she confided in me that she was thinking of becoming a nun. This was a bit of a shock to me; here was a young woman with lots of worldly opportunities, someone who I know had been looking forward to getting married someday and having her own home and family. I was taken aback. What makes a person want to give that up and make the vows of the convent – poverty, chastity, and obedience? I couldn't help being a bit sceptical. Had she had some sort of visionary experience, I wondered? Some dramatic epiphany written in the clouds that a more scientific mind would call a simple coincidence? I asked her, politely, "What makes you think of doing that?" And she responded with a poem. She said she couldn't stop thinking about the last verse of the hymn "My Song is Love Unknown." It's a poem for Good Friday: the poet goes through the passion story and wonders how he could ever deserve the love that Jesus showed that day. My friend quoted the last verse to me.

*Here might I stay and sing,  
No story so divine;  
Never was love, dear King!  
Never was grief like Thine.  
This is my Friend,  
in Whose sweet praise  
I all my days  
could gladly spend.*

That verse was her reason, and I've never heard a more convincing "call story." Some people, she said, just need to "stay and sing," to step out of the tide of people rushing about with certainty to an uncertain goal. Some people need to stop in the middle of a busy sidewalk as crowds pass by, and sing out what God has done. We really could spend all our days in his sweet praise, and spend them gladly. Of *course* it's wasteful. To dedicate our lives to a God we cannot see is extravagant; it's foolish; it makes no more sense than to burn candles in daylight, or to pour out a bottle of precious nard on a man's dirty feet.

But what we call foolishness is God's deepest truth, because God's own story is nothing less than divine foolishness. "Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men," says Paul, "and the weakness of God is stronger than men." God meets us as we make our sacrifice, whatever it might be, and treasures it. God takes us out of the economy of the world: the economy that counts coins. God takes us into the divine economy: the economy of self-emptying love – of precious drops sinking into the ground, poured out and spent, but not lost. God's love is costly; it's wasteful – wasteful to the point of death on a cross. But can love that isn't wasteful really be love?

God has given each of us a treasure that we hold in earthen vessels, like a jar of precious ointment. Mary laid her treasure at Jesus' feet; and we might, by the grace of God, do the same. "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."