

Albany Presbyterian Church
April 6th 2025

They say a particular smell can awaken memories from the past, perhaps something you have buried deep in your mind. The smell of bread... The scent of a flower, the smell of meadow, the smell of a room, of a loved one. Smells are surer than sounds or sights to make your heartstrings crack.

Our gospel story we read this morning invites us beyond the realms of words, speaking, and reading, perhaps encouraging us to reflect through our sense of smell and sensations.

There are many places in the gospels where a woman anoints Jesus and his feet, often with perfume oil or ointment reserved for special occasions. Usually, they are not named; most of the time, they are known to the people in her town, even as a woman who sinned.

Luke 7:36-50, Matthew 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9, and John 12:1-8 all share a similar story about a woman, or a few women, who came to Jesus and washed and anointed his feet or head.

John is the only gospel that names the woman; all other gospels do not give her a name. Most other gospels, except for John, place this story in the house of Simon the Leper. Mark depicts the woman anointing Jesus' head; others portray her anointing his feet. Most accounts describe the woman on her knees; some wept and let their tears wash the feet of Jesus before wiping them with their hair. All these actions symbolize incredible devotion and love, demonstrating the profound depth of their passion and heart.

All these stories speak of women's most extravagant love and devotion, yet some criticize the excessiveness of the gifts and Jesus for allowing this. Many prioritize the poor's needs over what they had done for Jesus. In all these stories, Jesus defends the actions of these women, praising their hospitality and the boundless outpouring of their love, viewing it as a prophetic gesture, particularly as a way of preparing for his burial.

“Leave her alone.” “Why are you bothering her?” “She is doing something beautiful for me.” “She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial.” (Mark 14:3-9). “Why are you bothering this woman? She has done something beautiful for me. When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial.” (Matthew 26)

Finally, in John 12:7, “Leave her alone,” “It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial.”

It is not that Jesus cares less about the poor than about himself when he responds to those who ask, “Why wasn't this sold and the money given to the poor?”

Jesus says, “You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.” “The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them whenever you want. But you will not always have me.”

What does that mean?

One of the commentators said that what Mary knows seems to be something that no one seems to know, even at this time in the context.

It was just a chapter away in chapter 11. Lazarus had died, and the two sisters summoned Jesus, who did not arrive until three days after his death. They were all present when Jesus called out to Lazarus, raising him back from the dead, and news of Jesus raising Lazarus spread throughout Judea. So much so that the Jewish authorities, priests, and Pharisees convened a meeting in the Sanhedrin, as noted in John 11:47. “What are we achieving? Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we allow him to continue like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” The high priest Caiaphas even said, “It is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.” They were looking for Jesus to kill. Verse 56 said they stood in the temple area asking one another, “Isn't he coming to the feast at all?” The authorities also gave orders that if anyone knew where Jesus was, they should come and tell them so that they could arrest him. For Jesus, the time was coming when he would be arrested and killed.

Jesus arrived at Bethany again 6 days before Passover. Mary and Martha were so grateful that Jesus raised their brother from the dead that they gave a banquet in his honor. Martha prepared dinner, Lazarus hosted the guests, and Mary presented the most incredible gifts they could offer to honor Jesus. Mary bought the most expensive and precious items available, befitting a King to honor Jesus, who said in John 11:25, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

In contrast, others did not even recognize who Jesus was or what God had planned for him; Jesus's time was near. Numerous times before, he explained God's plan for his life to his disciples and how it would be fulfilled through his death and resurrection. None of the disciples understood what was happening and did not perceive the urgency or seriousness of the events about to unfold.

Particularly Judas, who, as it turns out, had very different motivations for following Jesus. John explains that Judas was not only dishonest and indifferent to others, especially the poor, but he also sought to fulfill his desires and ultimately betrayed Jesus, leading to His death. However, John is the only one who names him as Judas; all other Gospel accounts do not mention anyone by name.

Jesus said it was meant for her to save this perfume for the day of my burial. In Matthew, Jesus clarified that it was to prepare my body for burial. We know spices and perfumes were used in ancient burial practices to mask the smell of decomposition and to show respect and honor to the deceased. Jesus was aware of this, and Mary's gifts and her anointing serve as a reminder that we have only a few days until Jesus is arrested and killed. Mary knows that it will be only a matter of time before the smell of death, once present at his brother's death, will overcome their senses once again as they stand in the tomb where Jesus was buried. This also reminds us that there are only a few days left in this season of Lent before we enter Holy Week, reflecting on the death and resurrection of Jesus. Soon, we will commemorate His triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. We will also remember how Jesus was betrayed, died, and was buried. Finally, we will celebrate the resurrection, grateful that Jesus fulfilled God's plan for our salvation, granting us forgiveness and reconciliation through His death and resurrection.

I wonder how long it lasted. The aroma of Mary's extravagant gift of love and devotion, which saturates the home and the minds of everyone inside, lingered in their memories as a reminder of the gratitude and passion of the only way to respond to Jesus, the Messiah, and the King who died for us so that we might live.

I also wonder how far my devotion to Jesus goes; I wonder if my heart and intention for Jesus are as pure and tender as that of Mary... enough to fill this space...

As I prepared for today, I decided to do something special. I have dipped some paper flowers into the perfume for you to take.

Take one, hold it in your hands, and close your eyes... may this help you remember the devotion and passion you once had for Jesus.

Let us pray...

Remind us, O God, as you did on that day, as the oil of perfume poured out on your feet, Jesus, just how grateful we are for you. Fill our hearts with passion and love for you as we enter this Holy feast. Saturate us with the aroma of your love, restore to us the passion and our devotion to you, again and again, for your great compassion towards us, in Jesus crucified and risen... in whose name we pray.

Amen.