

"Read the Room!"
Sunday, April 3, 2022
Fifth Sunday in Lent
Sermon Text: John 12:1-8

When I was a front-line manager in a previous job, I once had a boss who seemed to literally think that no one except for the person she was talking to had ears. This caused her to constantly say things that were inappropriate for the context she was in. I remember once we had just had a particularly tense meeting with our higher ups about not meeting our facilities goals and the financial impact of that situation. When I got back to my desk, which was open to my whole team who sat around me in an open floor plan, she loudly said, "Can you believe how bad we're doing? I wouldn't be surprised if we're all fired before the end of the year!" and just casually walked away before I could reply. I looked up and into the eyes of 12 now anxious employees surrounding me. Needless to say that none of us got much work done that day while I tried to calm nerves and get my team back on track. Being able to read a room is an important skill for any leader or speaker or really any human being. Today we encounter a passage where one follower of Jesus correctly reads the situation in the room while another completely misses the mark. We are in John 12:1-8.

¹Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ² There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³ 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. ⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the

poor?” ⁶ (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.) ⁷ Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it ^[c] so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸ You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

This week’s passage occurs in the Gospel of John just after the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. The text doesn’t tell us how long after the raising of Lazarus, but the text does tell us this passage happens just six days before the Passover where Jesus will institute the Last Supper and then face the cross the very next day. Jesus is visiting the town of Bethany where Lazarus, Mary and Martha all live and most likely in recognition of the miracle Jesus did for their family, they host a meal for him. Lazarus is there enjoying not being dead and Martha is serving the meal. Everything is going along like a normal party when Mary does something that is completely shocking in several ways.

The first shocking part is the use of pure nard (or spikenard as it is known now), which was an essential oil, not from the millennial mom in your Sunday School, but from the Himalayas. Usually, you would just use water to wash the feet of guests at dinner. People’s feet got quite dirty when sandals were the only footwear, and this washing was usually done by a servant or slave as a service to the guests at someone’s home. Yet, for Mary simple water is not good enough; she uses the spikenard instead. Since it had to be brought from so far away, it was very expensive; at the time of Jesus a denarius coin was worth one day’s wage to the average worker and this jar of pure perfume was worth 300 denarii according to Judas. (And Judas would know since he was the treasurer!) So, this was almost a year’s worth of wages that is being poured onto the dirty feet of Jesus!

But it's not just the cost of the gift that is shocking. It is the way in which it is given. This act breaks all sense of social propriety. Jewish women were not allowed to let their hair down in public. This was an act reserved intimate family relationships, husbands and children. And to wash someone's feet with your hair, you would have to get really close to them. Uncomfortably close. You don't get close to just anybody's feet and you don't let just anybody get close to your feet. That queasy feeling that some of you reading this right now are getting is exactly the same feeling those who would have witnessed this originally would have felt. This act was no more socially acceptable then than it would be now.

This beautiful bodily act is an example of how we can use our bodies in worship and service. Christians often make our faith so much about what's going on in our heads that our bodies hardly are involved. But we are physical beings, and our bodies are made to be involved in worship and service just as much as our minds are. If you're feeling it during worship, it's okay to close your eyes, to cry, to raise a hand, to kneel at the altar in prayer, to use of the sign of the cross. If you're not comfortable doing these things in public, try incorporating them into your private worship times. Our bodies are meant for worship just as much as our minds.

In the face of such worship from Mary, none of the disciples speak up except Judas and when he does speak up, it's not because he finds the sensuality of the scene inappropriate, but it's the expense of the act that bothers him. Judas argues that such a large amount of money would be better used on the poor. Judas is using an illogical argument that has become very pervasive in today's society, "whataboutism". Whataboutism is a way of deflecting attention away from an issue by charging hypocrisy without ever actually refuting the argument or engaging on the real issue. For example, if I were to say to the song leader at church "I really

didn't like the way you led that song last week in worship. I prefer the way it sounds on the radio." Then the song leader replies to me, "Well what about the last time you led worship? You completely botched that high E note!" In this case, the song leader didn't address why I disliked his version of the song, but tried to discredit me by pointing out how bad my singing was. Of course, my singing is not the point of this discussion, his is, which is why whataboutism is a popular way to try and "win" an argument. (This argument by the way is completely hypothetical. Our worship leaders all do a wonderful job. And I can't hit the high E!) However, whataboutism is not actually a way to win an argument but a way to distract from what is actually happening, which is what Judas is trying to do according to the author of John. Judas was the treasurer and wanted more funds in the treasury so he would have more to steal for himself.

Jesus easily sees through Judas' motivation and rebukes him for trying to stop Mary from her offering to Jesus. Jesus sees that Mary has correctly read the room and sees what is about to happen to Jesus, so she is offering what she can while she can. After all, Jesus is the poor person who is in front of her right at this moment, not some hypothetical poor person she doesn't know. Jesus has spent the last three years with no roof over his head, no place to call his own, no possessions other than what he can carry with him. He is the poor before her now. She recognizes the value of giving her gift in the now. She takes advantage of the precious gift of the present to show her love to Jesus, knowing that Jesus needs to feel love and comfort just like any other human does, especially as he is on his way to his darkest days. Perhaps the long-lasting smell of this perfume was in Jesus' nose as he came into Jerusalem, as he faced the taunts and torture he would face from the Roman guards and perhaps even as he hung on the

cross a whiff of the perfume reached his nose, reminding him that he had been loved and his life and ministry had changed people.

All around us are others who need our love and care in the now. We can plan and plot about how we will help people in the future and that often gives us a rush of feeling good about ourselves. While planning and using money wisely is certainly something we should do, we should not let it distract us from the needs we can meet now. There are people all around us who need the gift of our presence in a smile, hug or text. There are those who need a meal cooked for them because they are completely overwhelmed with life and its stress. People who are facing uncertain futures who need to feel our love and appreciation of them. May God open our eyes to see Jesus in those people and serve them as extravagantly as Mary did. Amen.