

The Brave Gift
John 12.1-8
March 13, 2016
Lent 5C
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Mary was the emotional one
she carried her heart on her sleeve
she got choked up when they said the blessing before a shared meal—
when everything smelled so good and was perfectly laid out
with candles glowing and wine flowing
the way Martha always got it just, exactly, beautifully right—
she was a romantic that way
wishing she could climb inside that feeling and live right there
when everything and everyone was just exactly as should be

she was quick to say “I love you”
and quick to lose her temper
and quick to pick a favorite
quick to get her feelings hurt
quick to protect
quick to fuss
and quick to forgive
everything with Mary was big

it was no different in her relationship with Jesus
in fact, it was all just that much bigger
somehow he saw her
she saw him
they got each other
oh, how she loved him
she was overcome with gratitude for what he meant to her
the space he made for her
the protection and affection he offered their family

one day she was apologizing all over herself
telling him she knew she should be more like her sister
knew she should be less emotional
and give more of herself

serve more
sit and talk less
she wanted to try harder to change
to be more in control

and he just laughed and looked at her in that way of his
as if to say:

“Now why in the world would you want to go and do something foolish like that?”

he smiled and stared at her for awhile before he spoke:

“Oh, Mary, the world needs you just as you are.”

then he told her sister just as much

“She chooses well, with that big heart of hers,¹

and she’s a gift to the whole world just as she is.

What might this world be like if we all loved

half as big as Mary does! What a gift she is to us all!”

well, that seemed to settle that

at least for a while

She’d fallen apart into a million tiny pieces just days ago—

it felt like weeks—

how long had it been

since Lazarus died?²

they’d sent for Jesus because they knew he would heal him

they knew how he loved them

they knew no one in the world loved Lazarus like Jesus and those sisters

Martha thought it might be too much to ask or expect

but Mary knew he would never let Lazarus remain sick

and then Jesus didn’t come

and her brother died

Martha organized the funeral

and made sure the cloths and spices were just right

she gathered the women to help and quietly went to work

taking care of everything and everyone

but Mary was angry—

heartbroken—

her brother lost and her friend nowhere to be found

¹ Luke 10.38-42

² John 11.1-44

and then he showed up too late
four days after Lazarus was dead and buried
and she exploded when she heard he was waiting outside for her
angry and grieving with tears and rage flowing altogether
"If you had been here, none of this would have happened!"
oh, how she wept and moaned
with disappointment and disbelief and her heart wishing it had all been a bad dream
she cried so hard that everyone around her was crying, too
even Jesus
he wept right there with her

she would never forget how he wept with her
how his heart broke with hers
how he loved Lazarus just like she did
how he seemed to know that was what she needed
and he met her right where she was
in the thickness of all that grief

she would never forget how he wiped his own tears away
and took a slow, deep breath
she thought maybe that's when they'd pray together
or share a meal or light a candle
or just sit for a while in the silence that comes
after friends have wept until their faces are swollen

but the way he spoke Lazarus back into being
how he screamed for Lazarus to come out
and everything fell silent
and everyone stood still
no, she wasn't prepared for that
everyone thought maybe he'd finally lost it
all this teaching and healing and blessing and anointing
all this constantly traveling around and taking care of everyone else
and believing he really could make this old world into a new one
he hollered so loud that all of her tears dried up
and Mary began to worry she'd been too hard on her dear friend

but lo and behold
that smell caught the breeze

and Lazarus came out
still wrapped up like the mummy he was supposed to be
and Jesus, weak from weeping and raising that man from the dead,
said, "Unbind him. Let him go." and unbind him they did

enough had happened in the days since then
that she knew what was coming next
you can't raise a man from the dead without people talking about it
so naturally, everyone knew what Jesus had done
Jesus could no more lay low and draw less attention to himself
than Mary could stop feeling all the feelings
and so it was
he would be the next one behind that stone
and the cloths and spices would come back out again
and the weeping would start up again
but this time there'd be no one to call him out of that tomb
he'd be gone, and it already made her sick to think of it
and she knew she was powerless to stop any of it

sure, he'd be with them forever
in the way loved ones live on in our hearts
and show up in little cosmic winks and signs
like rainbow shining through stained glass
or a familiar tune humming from a far off place
or the wafting of perfume blowing by in a room with no breeze

and somehow, as she thought about this,
she had her answer
she knew what she would do
she couldn't stop the path
she couldn't stop the government
she couldn't make people hear him and understand him and know him like she did
she couldn't make them see what she saw
or feel what she felt when he was near

but she could bless him
and say thank you
and tell him again that she loved him
and mark this moment that was very well going to be their last
and she could do it in a way that they'd all remember

so that every time they caught that fragrance
every time they moved that bottle from one shelf to the next
every time that smell blew through the air
they would remember

they would remember the way it felt to be together around the table
when it was set just so and he looked each one of them straight in the eyes
they would remember the time he made for them
for teaching and laughing and explaining and arguing and telling one more story
and how well he loved them all just as they were
no matter who they were or what their backgrounds were
whether they were men or women, affluent or poor as dirt, powerful or ordinary
they would remember that he loved in ways that didn't always make sense
in ways that seemed reckless
in ways that were extravagant
and decadent
and pure gift

that's exactly what he was.
they would remember that he was pure gift
they would remember that he made that same space for them
to discover their own gift, their own light, their own salt
to know their lives for the gifts that they are
they would remember how he invited them to follow his path
to give themselves to his way
and, in turn, give their fullest and best selves to the world

for once, she wasn't worried about what others would think
she knew it was the best she had to offer
she knew it was her last chance
she knew he deserved to know how loved he was
she knew she'd regret it if she didn't try

and so Mary slipped away from that perfect table
with the candles burning and
the food laid out just so by her sister
and her should-have-been-dead but very-much-alive brother
sitting and talking with their closest friend
she walked to the shelf where she'd been keeping the jar
of that decadent, fantastic oil...just in case

she went straight to the spot where Jesus was sitting
and she moved alongside him to his feet
as she looked on that scene and at the feet of her friend
she remembered that old poem,
“How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’”³

That’s exactly what he had done—
brought peace
and goodness
and saved them all
in ways they never knew they even needed

In one swift move
she poured that oil right over those peace bringing,
gospel carrying, salvation announcing feet

as the fragrance filled the room she remembered everything
from the first time she met him
to the stories and laughter
to the weeping and grief
to the shouting and resurrecting
to that meal
in that moment
and all the meals that wouldn’t be
and the empty space he would leave forever
without thinking of anyone else in the room
she let down her hair as though they were alone
and she used it to wipe the oil across his skin

it was the least she could do
to thank him
and to bless him
and to show her great love
for the gift that he was to them all

³ Isaiah 52.7

then Judas cleared his throat
lately, Judas was always close by to mess things up
these days he seemed always the cynic and the skeptic
as soon as she heard him,
she knew he'd laugh at this ridiculous gesture,
and sure enough he mocked her for not being rational
for not being practical
for not being frugal
for not acting out of the narrow, literal understanding
of what so many thought Jesus was teaching
"This is a bit much, don't you think?"
his voice dripped about as much as the oil did
"And what about the poor, Jesus? Such a waste."

this time he didn't scream
but his voice hit the room with just as much force
"Leave her alone," Jesus commanded
it was like that time he was out in the wilderness⁴
and the devil himself threw out half-verses and weak interpretation
to lure Jesus into selfish dreams
Judas wasn't getting to the heart of things
so Jesus spoke to them all from the scripture

"If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'"⁵

"Surely we have come to such a time as this, dear Judas,
and Mary is brave enough to show us."

⁴ Matthew 4.1-11

⁵ Deuteronomy 15.7-11

and as that last word hung in the air
alongside the smell of Mary's gift
they all knew this was almost the end
and each one of them, maybe even old Judas,
remembered how freely he had given to the first and the last of them
how open his heart always was
how his open life had allowed theirs to open in return

the smell of perfume awakened them⁶
to the smell of the half-finished wine sitting before them
poured out and shared
and the freshly baked bread on that table
broken and blessed

they remembered
the smell of the grass where so often they'd sat and heard him teach
the fragrance of the dirt roads they'd all walked together
not one of them could tell where the wafting of memories ended
and wafting of Mary's brave gift began
not one of them would forget the way they felt
as they realized they really wouldn't always have him, pure gift that he was.

As we prepare to stand and sing our final hymn, "Be Thou My Vision," I will be at the front with my very favorite bottle of oil. If you wish to come forward and receive a word of blessing, it will be my honor to share this gift with you. Won't you come?

⁶ The idea of "Simultaneous Smells" came from this reflection from Karoline Lewis:
<http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4554>