

Sermon for Lent V 2010

Much of this sermon comes from a much longer essay by Mary Graves from the Journey for Jesus web site. Mary is the senior pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church in San Carlos, CA

We all know how important it is to have close friends. Jesus had some very close friends who were not among the twelve disciples. They were Lazarus and his two sisters, Martha and Mary. He went to their home for meals and part of his ministry was conducted there.

They were such close friends of Jesus that when Lazarus became seriously ill Martha and Mary sent an urgent message to Jesus telling him, “Come quick! The one you love is sick.” They figured that Jesus would come to them right away and make Lazarus well as he had so many others. But Jesus didn’t come until four days after Lazarus had died, and the two sisters were deep in grief. When Jesus did show up, both Mary and Martha went to him and said, “You know, if you had been here Lazarus wouldn’t have died.”

The story of the death and resurrection of Lazarus is, as Jesus said, a sign story. Even though this story is about Lazarus, the story points beyond itself to Jesus’ death and resurrection. That is what sign stories do. They point beyond themselves to tell us deep things about God.

Communion is a sign story. When we stand at the Lord’s table and say, “on the night that Jesus was arrested and betrayed, he took bread and broke it, and he took the cup” — the telling and the enactment of the Last Supper points beyond itself to tell us something important about God’s love for us in Christ.

Sign stories. That is what the gospel for this week does. It is a simple story: a dinner in the home of Lazarus and Martha and Mary, several of Jesus’ disciples are there. They are having this dinner party in honor of Jesus, probably to celebrate all that he did for Lazarus and this family.

It was customary when you hosted a dinner to wash the feet of your guests. Walking was their main mode of travel, walking in sandals or barefoot, and their feet needed cleansing and refreshment. So, Mary washes Jesus’ feet.

But John makes it very clear, as does Jesus, that this is more than just a dinner. What Mary does is more than just wash Jesus' feet. What she does is a sign. The story points beyond itself to reveal something important about God and what God is doing .

We are invited to look closer, beneath the surface of this story. John does not want us to miss the significance of what is being revealed here about Jesus' passion.

Like Judas, they just saw on the surface. He looked at what Mary did and said, "What a ridiculous waste! Why wasn't this perfume sold and given to the poor?" Yet he cared nothing for the poor; he was a thief! His words had nothing to do with Jesus' compassion or love. He only saw the surface meaning of Jesus' life.

John gives us this story as we journey into Holy Week. Don't miss the significance of Jesus' passion. Look deeply into the story of Mary's passionate act. It is a sign story taking us deeper into the reality of God's passionate love for us in Christ.

This very simple drama in John takes us beyond the surface pieces to the Passion. What's happening here? After all that happened to Lazarus you can imagine how much it meant to this family to have Jesus in their home and to serve him. When Mary bent down to do the customary washing of feet she took this outrageously expensive vial of perfume. She broke the alabaster neck of it and poured it onto Jesus feet.

When we are told by Judas that this perfume could have been sold in the market for three hundred denarii, that's a lot of money! A denarii was a day's wage in those days and three hundred denarii was a year's salary. Can you imagine having a special dinner guest over and anointing him in with a bottle of \$100,000 perfume? What Mary did was beyond extravagant! It was this outpouring of love and gratitude that knew no bounds.

I think it's important, too, as we look deeply into this story to acknowledge that there are definite sexual overtones to what Mary did. I'm amazed that the commentaries that I read didn't bring any attention to this at all. Maybe they were afraid to. But this scene is loaded with sexual overtones.

First of all, Jesus and Mary are both single adults of marriageable age and available. That automatically creates a dynamic right there. Just a look or a touch that isn't overtly sexual *can* be because we are sexual beings and never stop being sexual beings.

Also, in Jesus' day a woman was not allowed to let her hair down in public because there was something about that act that was considered sexual. Women didn't wear their hair short; they wore it long. Once they moved beyond girlhood they always wore their hair tied up or back. To wear it down in public marked you as an immoral woman.

When Jesus arrived at the house for dinner Mary, went to him with this family treasure in her hand and this deep love in her heart. Once he was seated she bent down and took his dirty and tired feet into her hands. She touched them and washed them and massaged them in a way that communicated the esteemed place of honor he held in her heart and in this family.

Then she broke open the flask and poured this fragrant ointment on his feet. Everybody in the room immediately was filled and moved by the fragrance of it. Then she loosened her hair and let it fall to her shoulders. She bent low to the floor with her face on the ground so that she could wipe Jesus' feet. The scene is charged with passionate love!

But this scene isn't really about Mary. It is pointing beyond itself to Jesus and his passionate love. Sexual intimacy and marriage language are the Bible's favorite metaphors for talking about God's passionate love relationship with us.

What Mary does here is a passionate act. And it points beyond her to the rest of what is going to unfold for Jesus. He is going to bend down to wash the feet of his disciples. He is going to take the greatest family treasure he owns, his own life, break the neck of the flask of his own life blood.

His death will look like a complete waste of a good life. But this story of Mary tells us differently. Jesus' journey to the cross is the greatest act of self-giving intimate love ever, and out of it God gives us the miracle of new life. Passover is near. Holy Week is coming. What will we see? What will you see? Hopefully, through these sign stories we will see the passionate love of God.

“The whole house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment.” May the whole church and your whole journey through Holy Week be filled with the sweet fragrance of God’s passionate love for you.