

Sermon

Lent 5C April 6, 2025

John 12:1-8

If you haven't noticed, the Gospel of John is . . . different. Unlike the other three, John only records five obvious miracles. Jesus is given to long monologues. The interplay between light and dark is an important theme. Where creation begins in the Garden and God calls out to Adam by name because he doesn't want to be found, on Easter morning Mary is in the Garden and Jesus calls to her by name because she is looking for him. The gospel has a cosmic beginning and there is a deep sense of the mystical.

John packs a whole lot of symbolism and mystery into his stories, and this short gospel passage is no exception.

“Six days before the Passover . . .” Six days in which to work, and then Jesus rested in the grave on a Holy Sabbath. Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead, ate with Jesus signifying new life. Mary anoints Jesus' feet in an act of humble service, which also foreshadows his anointing by Joseph and Nicodemus at his burial. So, what to focus on?

At our Annual Meeting I asked you to participate in an exercise where you shared stories of Saint Luke's. We then collected words reflective of those stories and I asked you to mark the words that you found most important. The words that received the most votes were forgiving, compassion, kindness, caring, and several around worship. The Vestry is working with these words as a guide to reflect who we are and how we can live into the vision those words elicit.

As I was thinking about today's gospel passage, it occurred to me that this passage reflected our Annual Meeting exercise. Within this episode are elements of compassion, caring, and worship.

Compassion and caring are closely related. Compassion has to do with a desire to alleviate the suffering of another person. With hindsight we know that this act of Mary foreshadowed Jesus' death and burial. I doubt she knew what lay in store for Jesus as he entered Jerusalem, was betrayed, and executed; but I want to believe that Jesus was able to look back on this compassionate act as providing some relief while he hung on the cross.

Caring has to do with being attentive to the needs of another. In today's gospel, this caring aspect came from Jesus to Mary as he was attentive to her need for protection. Judas attacked her for foolishly spending money on that perfume rather than giving it to the poor. He does what people always do – attack someone using an alternative group to gain sympathy without actually meaning to do anything for that group. But Jesus cared for Mary by protecting her from further attacks.

Mary had an intense belief that Jesus was who he said he was. At this dinner to honor him – because apparently baking a pie to say, “Thanks for raising my brother from the dead” wasn't enough – Mary anoints the feet of Jesus. This in itself was an act of worship, and she offered her body, mind, and spirit in complete devotion.

This was a risky move on her part. Risky because of the apparent waste of costly perfume (see Judas). Risky because of her very public act of anointing his feet. Risky because, at that moment, she was willing to put her proclaimed faith into action.

Again, thinking back on the Annual Meeting and this passage, what would Saint Luke's look like, or what could Saint Luke's become, if we fully embodied this story? How might we change if we were as compassionate, caring, and worshipful as the characters in this story?

How might we be a more visibly compassionate congregation? If compassion has to do with alleviating suffering, the best way to do this is to increase our aid to, and presence at, the Food Pantry. Medical debt and an inability to pay utilities are bound to cause suffering, both physically and mentally. Could we look for ways to help alleviate that sort of suffering?

How could we offer a spirit of caring and better care for the needs of others. One way we do this now is through Meals for the Soul, where we offer the care of nourishment for those who need it. But as our congregation ages, other needs will arise. Rides to and from church, medical appointments, or the grocery store might be helpful. Basic contact with others through phone calls, letters, or visits show and provide care.

Expanding outside our walls, could we care for children in need of school supplies by providing that service? And donations to the Rector's Discretionary Fund allow for emergency care.

As Mary worshipped the Lord completely, are we as willing to pour out ourselves in worship? Our liturgy is in need of roles to be filled. What's stopping you from offering your gifts and talents in joyful service to the Lord? That's a risky thing to do, to put ourselves out there in public. But while our faith may be private, we are also called to live it out publicly.

I could go on, but I'm not here to berate or cajole you. I am, however, here to get you to think.

From our Annual Meeting you found the most important aspects of Saint Luke's to be worship, caring, and compassion. If we see ourselves that way, we need to live into those words. We need to empty ourselves as Mary emptied herself in such ways that this place is filled with the fragrance of beautiful worship made up of compassionate and caring people such that that fragrance permeates every part and person of this place. The more we live into that, the more we will be filled with the holy scent of love and service.

As that fragrance permeates this place and us, it then might be said that what we do here will be proclaimed in all the world. And what this small church does just might reflect one of the biggest mysteries of God - a people living out their faith in very unexpected ways.

Amen.