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Trinity Episcopal Church

Isaiah 43: 16 – 21

Psalm 126

Philippians 3: 4b – 14

John 12: 1 – 8

Last Sunday, we had the Parable of the Prodigal Father – the father who loves both of his sons with reckless extravagance. Today we have another story of prodigal love – that of Mary of Bethany, and of course, that of God.

Today's Gospel comes from the 12th chapter of John, the chapter that is the bridge or hinge between the two major sections of John's Gospel, which are known as the Book of Signs (1 – 12) and the Book of Glory (13 – 21). The Book of Signs is about Jesus' ministry over the course of three years, and it contains seven signs, or miracles, which all point to Jesus' true identity as the Son of God. The first of these is Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana. The last is Jesus raising Lazarus back to life. The Book of Glory is about the final week of Jesus' life – his journey into Jerusalem and then his passion, death and resurrection. What we hear today at the beginning of Chapter 12 is part of the prelude to the Book of Glory. Jesus' time has not yet come, but it is about to.

Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead is the final straw that breaks the camel's back, according to the chief priests and Pharisees. Curing a leper or driving out a demon is one thing, but raising someone from the dead just goes beyond the pale. It is too much, and from the moment that Lazarus walks out of tomb, bound up like a mummy in a bad horror flick, the Temple leadership is out to get Jesus. In giving Lazarus life, Jesus places a death warrant on his own. Jesus' days are numbered, and he knows it.

Because he can no longer move about openly, Jesus leaves Bethany with his disciples and goes to an out-of-the-way town on the edge of the wilderness called Ephraim, perhaps fifteen miles from Jerusalem. Some amount of time passes, a few days, a few weeks. Passover is approaching and Jesus knows that his time is near. So with some of his disciples, he returns to Bethany for the last night before he enters Jerusalem.

Bethany is a suburb of Jerusalem, perhaps a mile and a half to the east. It is, of course, the home of Mary, Martha and their brother, Lazarus, the one so recently dead and resurrected. It is a place that Jesus frequents with some regularity when he travels to Jerusalem. Jesus is very close to this family. John even tells us that Jesus loves them. Though that love is obviously reciprocated, Martha, Mary and Lazarus all refer to Jesus as "Lord," so, unlike many of the disciples, they do have some idea of who Jesus really is. And yet, they treat him as another brother in the family – with familiarity and honesty. They are, as Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "the three people in whose presence Jesus can be a man as well as a messiah." The siblings provide a place of refuge for Jesus, away from the madding crowds, away from suspicious eyes and ears.

Martha the busy one, Mary the passionate yet contemplative one, and Lazarus, fresh from the tomb, decide to throw a dinner party. Despite the anxiety and tension in the air for Jesus' safety, or perhaps because of it, Jesus' friends want to have a festive evening. Remember in last week's Gospel where the father decides to celebrate because his son who was dead (metaphorically, at least) is alive

again? Well, Mary and Martha want to celebrate because their brother who was really, really dead, *not* in any metaphorical sense, is alive. The word that John uses for “dinner” [δειπνον] is used elsewhere in his Gospel only for what we call the “last supper.” This meal in Bethany foreshadows Jesus’ last meal.

All is going so well. In the midst of so many reminders of death – Lazarus himself, the threats to Jesus and the empty, briefly-used tomb in the back yard – even with all of that, there is gaiety and celebration. The wine flows and the decibel level of the conversations gradually rises. Until...until Mary does something so unexpected, so jarring, so prophetic.

Nobody had noticed that Mary had slipped out at some point. There are a couple of glances as she comes back into the room with the air of a woman on a mission. She is carrying a clay pot as she walks directly over to where Jesus is reclining next to Lazarus. Silently, she kneels at his feet. It is one of those times when everyone stops talking all at once, and all eyes are mesmerized with what Mary is doing. In quick succession, she does four things. First, she reaches up to loosen the pins holding her hair up, and her long, dark waves cascade down around her shoulders. It is unheard of. It is scandalous. A respectable woman would never let her hair down in front of a man who is not her husband or family member, and here Mary is, in front of a number of men.

Then, secondly, Mary breaks open the seal on the clay pot and pours its contents over Jesus’ feet. It might possibly be excused if she had poured it over his head, the usual signification of being anointed as a king, but she has chosen his feet. It is customary to wash the dirty, travel-weary feet of one’s guests when they arrive, but there is only one kind of people who get their feet anointed with this balm, this ointment: dead people.

As the nard runs over Jesus’ feet, the fragrance, a distinct, sharp scent, somewhere between ginseng and mint, fills the air. Where not so very long ago the stench of death pervaded, the heady aroma of this balm permeates the whole house, filling it instead with the fragrance of love. It is a very costly salve, used in small quantities to anoint bodies before burial. Perhaps it is left over from Lazarus’ entombment. The quantity that Mary has, perhaps half a liter, is worth a whole year’s salary for a laborer. Imagine having a guest for dinner and anointing them with \$40 – 50,000 of perfume. It is incredibly, recklessly extravagant what Mary does with this salve - lavishing it over Jesus’ ankles and feet and toes, letting it all run out of the pot, to the shocked astonishment of everyone in the room. It is prodigal love made tangible as the coolness of the balm covers the tired, calloused feet of Jesus.

The third thing that Mary does is touch Jesus’ feet, caressing them as she rubs in the salve. It is blatantly sensual. She knows these feet; she has sat by these feet. But single women of age and single men of age, especially a rabbi, do not touch one another, not even among close friends. Open mouths give away that the onlookers are aghast.

Then, fourthly, Mary leans over even further so that she can use her long hair as a towel to wipe off the excess ointment. [wipe – εκμασσο – same verb used for Jesus’ actions at the last supper] Perhaps Mary uses her hair because she wants a reminder of this night to linger as part of herself for a while. Her face is practically close enough to kiss his feet. Her actions are absolutely incomprehensible to everyone else in the room. Well, everyone but Jesus.

Everyone is still in shock from what they are witnessing when Judas, the treasurer for the disciples, objects. Not on the basis of sexual mores, mind you, but on the basis of the supposed waste of what could have been used to help the poor. Perhaps, Kate Huey writes, the only thing worse than not caring about the poor is pretending to care about them. Here, on the verge of betraying Jesus, Judas pretends to know what it means to be a faithful disciple. [John's use of the word 'thief' (κλεπτης) to describe Judas is the same word used to describe the one who threatens the flock when Jesus is talking about the Good Shepherd.] Jesus, who always expresses his concern for the poor, who *champions* the poor and marginalized, and who knows what is really going on with Judas, responds in a way that is almost as unfathomable for the people present as Mary's actions. "Leave her alone. Leave me alone. You will always have the poor with you, but you won't always have me." The specter of death is never far away at this point. What Jesus really means is that Mary understands his immediate present and his imminent future far better than do any of the others present.

What Mary has done is a sign, just like Jesus' signs. The story points beyond itself to reveal something about God and how God is choosing to act through Jesus. Jesus' public ministry began with an extravagance of wine, and now, here, it ends with this extravagance of balm. Mary's outpouring of love and gratitude for Jesus and what he has done knows no limits. She cannot do enough for him to let him know it. There is nothing prudent or measured or economical about what Mary does, just as there will be nothing prudent or measured or economical about how Jesus dies. There is everything passionate and loving in Mary's actions, just as there will be in Jesus'. Her recklessly extravagant display of love points to God's recklessly extravagant display of love and mercy made manifest for us through the crucifixion and resurrection.

What Mary does, before Jesus ever even explains it to the rest of his disciples, is to model faithful discipleship par excellence. Her life models that of the sheep to Jesus' Good Shepherd. When Lazarus dies and Jesus arrives, she responds when he calls her by name. Mary models humility and servanthood days before the last supper, when Jesus will kneel before his friends to wash their feet and point to that as what discipleship looks like. Mary gives extravagantly without counting the cost. Jesus will give the most extravagant gift of all. Mary understands Jesus' upcoming departure, even though many of Jesus' disciples do not, despite Jesus telling them repeatedly. John is clearly naming Mary, a woman, as the first to embody the love that is commanded of all disciples.

We are heading into Jerusalem with Jesus in this next week. Passover is near. Good Friday is coming. As the Rev. Dan Clendinen notes, the Book of Glory, the story of Jesus' passion, is not just another tragic story of a great leader getting murdered. It is the story of God's passion; it is about God's wildly extravagant love. And it is this to which Mary's anointing of Jesus points.

What does recklessly extravagant love look like this week in your life or mine, or our life together as Trinity? Where will we cast our inhibitions to the wind in order to love prodigally? How will we, like Mary and Martha and Lazarus, provide refuge in our hearts for Jesus, all the time, but especially in the events of the next two weeks? How will we, in living out our discipleship, point to the recklessly extravagant love of God? +