Fifth Sunday in Lent (C) || April 6, 2025 || 9:30 am St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Hanover, MA || Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8 || The Reverend Amy Whitcomb Slemmer, Esq.

Grace Filled Extravagance

It has been a very busy weekend for the St. Andrew's campus! On Friday, we gathered for our weekly potluck and watching of the Chosen (we are at episode 5 if you want to follow along), yesterday we had the pleasure of hosting our friends who are the Vestry of St. Stephens in Cohasset, and then we had our youth fundraiser), and now, here you are – either in person, or on-line – Welcome! You made it to church on this rainy and windswept day!

It is a delight to gather, to spend some time in reflection and worship, and to center ourselves for a few minutes on a gospel story that appears in all four gospels!

The version that we read this morning was probably written around the year 90. It is as though a writer today were telling about an event that happened in the 1960's. Not so long ago that there aren't people still alive who can speak with direct experience, but minute details have probably been lost.

A couple of the gospel versions suggest that the Mary in the story is Mary Magdeleine, rather than Mary of Bethany – and if we are keeping score of our scriptural siblings or you are a bible aficionado or trivia buff -, it is NOT absolutely clear that these are two separate women. Most scholars agree that these are distinct women, but some of the gospels are less clear.

For this morning, let us dial in on the fact that the sisters Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus are very important to Jesus. They are his friends and he declares his love for them several times throughout his life.

As historical visitors, we also know that the fact that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, just a few weeks before this story, most certainly sealed his fate and impacted the timing of his death. After he raised Lazarus, there were hundreds of people who were suddenly convinced of his divinity and were eager to join in as a follower, or as a faithful disciple

seeking their own healing or time with Jesus. After the restoration of Lazarus to life, word has travelled quickly as you can imagine!

The intimate meal described in this morning's gospel takes place just days before the feast of Passover – which for Jesus and for us, we know and reenact as the Last Supper. As far as we know, this is the last time that Jesus finds himself among friends, sequestered from the bustling crowds who are headed to Jerusalem for the Passover feast. Out of sight of his growing groups of believers, and beyond the reach of the Roman guards who are hunting for him.

He is gathered with Judas, and perhaps other disciples, but the focus here is really on the relationship between Martha, Mary and Lazareth. Jesus loves his friends, and perhaps is grateful for this peaceful respite. We can imagine the group talking and catching up on the extraordinary events of the last few weeks. Perhaps Lazareth is narrating what it is like to be back among the living? Martha may be quietly consulting with her sister about the food she is preparing. Nothing in this narrative or its prelude makes the arrival of the jar of Nard seem normal.

I wonder whether Mary had purchased the expensive perfume to anoint her brother Lazarus when he died? We all know, according to at least one vivid gospel account, that Lazarus had been dead long enough that, frankly, he stunk. A pound of pure Nard would have cost a full year's wages, and while we have a brief but false protestation from Judas (who is certainly offering an early example of Virtue Signaling), Jesus knows that Mary is demonstrating not only her love for her friend but the fact that she has been listening.

Mary, in this morning's gospel, is the only one of the disciples who is preparing for Jesus' death. Perhaps she is aware that Jesus has sacrificed himself and condemned himself to death. If the powers that be were perplexed about an itinerant carpenter who is traveling the countryside, keeping company with sinners, offering peculiar, norm-shattering lessons and sermons, and is growing in popularity – they had to be terrified or threatened to their core by the possibility of a conquering king who can raise the dead back to life!

There are a number of norm-shattering portions of this story. First, a woman – Mary is ministering to and physically touching a man. This was unheard of in ancient times. This sort of role reversal, or women's liberation is part of what sets Jesus' ministry and story in the realm of the extraordinary. And if it was a gross violation of religious and cultural norms to have a woman reach out to a man, it was absolutely forbidden for a woman to let her hair down, to untie it and be seen with it uncovered and hanging loose. Again, as historical visitors, that detail might be lost on us, and is worth reminding ourselves of just what a radical act of extravagant love we are privy to (we are witnessing!)

Even in our current circumstances, the use of our hair as a towel to dry anyone's feet would be deeply intimate, and would mean that we had this perfume with us for days! Perhaps Mary would smell of Nard even as Jesus leaves her family and continues on the road to Jerusalem.

Each of the people in this gospel story are giving of themselves to Jesus. They are cooking and serving him. Lazarus is seated at the table offering a listening ear and his presence – his living presence, embodying the miracle that Jesus had performed, and perhaps reminding us of Christ's power in the world – perhaps Jesus' first triumph over death. But it is Mary from whom we must take our cue. Mary, who breaks stereotypical boundaries to love her friend Jesus. This may have been the only physical touch Jesus experienced in days, and will certainly remain with him, when just days from now he is excoriated and tortured.

Just over ten days from now, we are given the opportunity to follow Mary's example, with the intimate act of washing each others' feet when we gathering on April 17th for a simple Agape supper at 6, and we reenact Mary's washing of Jesus' feet and Jesus, our servant leader, washing the feet of the disciples before the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday.

I know that it is both an intimate act and for most of us can be wildly uncomfortable, this symbolic act of foot washing. As we approach our memorialization and reenactment of this loving, extravagant example – Mary's use of costly perfume, may we banish our inhibitions. May we remember that Jesus taught us to pray, prepared us for the shared passover dinner, and part of that was to wash the peoples' feet in an act of humility, trust and deep vulnerability.

Those are the traits that we may cling to for the remaining days of Lent – vulnerability, humility and trust. I believe that Jesus clung to Mary's extravagant love and gift of being touched by her long hair and her loving hands as he hung on the cross. I believe that Mary's preparation and outward love and devotion buffered Jesus from the unfathomable pain that was his three hour ordeal on the cross.

God bless Mary of Bethany, her sister Martha and their brother Lazarus for loving Jesus in such beautiful ways, for providing a safe harbor as the events of Holy Week were on the horizon.

May each of us experience those rare gifts of grace-filled extravagance and love that help buffer us from life's pain, disappointments and death – and when we are on the receiving end of those lavish gifts, may we thank Mary and Jesus for showing us the way. Amen+