

John 12, perfume, April 2019

Randi Alreck has been leading a small group in some Lenten spiritual practices this last month, and it's been a really interesting and inspiring experience. We're meeting on Wednesdays at 6:12, and she provides soup, and you can still get in on the action for a two more weeks! The first week, Randi introduced a practice called Imaginative Prayer that is attributed to Ignatius of Loyola, a Spanish saint of the 16th century. In this practice, one not only reads a Scripture passage, but prays it, or meditates one's way into it, through the use of one's imagination. The object is to imagine yourself within the story, paying particular attention to the sensory details---what do you see, hear, feel, and so forth? Sight is the easiest sense for us to imagine, I'm guessing---we can imagine seeing Jesus embracing children, for example, or healing the man born blind. Hearing works quite well, too, as does touch---if we are in the sinking boat in the stormy seas with the terrified disciples, we can hear the waves crash against the boat, we can feel the spray drenching us over the sides of the boat. Even taste can be brought to play, as we might imagine eating the bread at the feeding of the 5000 or tasting the fish that Jesus grills for a shore breakfast when he appears to his disciples after his resurrection. The sense that we likely use least easily or often in such an imaginative prayer approach to Scripture would be smell. But all of that changes this morning, when we read this extraordinary story about Jesus in the home of his friends in Bethany, where Mary anoints his feet with perfume. Startling and unconventional though her action was, equally surprising is the detail Luke provides in this story: "The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume." We are invited to *smell* this story. And I honestly can't easily think of any other story about Jesus where we are drawn into the action through

fragrance, through our sense of smell. Which makes this story exceptional, then, in so many ways.

Let's think about that olfactory sense of smell for a moment. As you may know, smell is linked more closely with memory than any other of our senses, which is intriguing. I love to use my sense of smell. I'm one of those annoying people in a gift store or at a craft sale who wants to smell every single candle scent or every possible soap. I can spend 20 minutes at the Bath and Body store at the Mall, comparing candle scents in order to find the perfect devotional candle while my husband waits in the hallway, unable to bear the heavy combination of strong scents in the store. And if you reflect, I think you will find, as I do, that smells do conjure up memories quite powerfully. The smell of sun tan lotion transports me to the beach at Bush Lake, in Bloomington, where I went swimming as a child. The smell of ben gay brings to life my beloved Great Aunt, who had arthritis and used ben gay quite freely. You no doubt have similar associations with smells, deeply embedded within. And this lesson features that sense of smell, the fragrance of the perfume, which we could safely assume was forever etched in the minds of those present when this act of Mary's occurred in our lesson today. We're going to explore this story through that unusual detail about fragrance that we are given; we are going to *smell* our way to the heart of this story by considering that fragrant perfume.

The perfume in question stirs up considerable controversy, and no wonder....it was extremely valuable and there was a great deal of it. The perfume, according to Judas, at least, was worth 300 hundred denari, about the annual earnings of the typical peasant worker at that time. Let's translate that into our time and place, using the fact that the MN state minimum wage

is a bit under \$10 an hour. But multiply \$10 an hour times 52 work weeks of 40 hours each, and you find yourself at \$20,800. So Mary has a jar of perfume worth a bit over \$20,000. Good Lord! That means it's worth \$1,250 dollars *an ounce*, because she has a pound of it. Today, expensive perfumes are typically sold in bottles ranging from 1 and ½ ounces to 3 and ½ ounces. But, Mary has 16 ounces, a *pound* of expensive perfume. Having one of those enquiring minds that wants to know, I looked up the list of the 10 most expensive perfumes in the world today. Mary's perfume would have come in between numbers 6 and 7 on the list, in terms of price per ounce. So in fact, there are presently 6 perfumes that cost more than \$1200 an ounce in the world today, but Mary's perfume would make the current top ten list and is certainly something awfully special. How can that be? How does *Mary* come to have this costly perfume at hand?

This Mary, you recall, is part of the family of three siblings that were among Christ's closest friends and ardent followers. Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. The siblings lived in a home in Bethany, in the southern part of ancient Palestine, near Jerusalem. Jesus grew up and lived most of his life in Galilee, the less prestigious northern area of Palestine, so he most likely came to know these three in his adult life, and it seems he went to their home to be among dear friends, to relax, and to be himself, away from the pressures of his ministry. There are three stories that feature Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. The first is in the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus comes to visit their household for a meal. This is the story where Mary sits at his feet to listen, while Martha is busy getting the meal ready and, exasperated with her sister, asks Jesus to tell her to help. As you recall, he refuses, saying that Mary has chosen the better role in this situation, that of listener rather than cook and meal server. The second story of the three is just prior to the one we have today, in the 11th chapter of John. In this story, Lazarus dies, and Jesus comes, but too late, it

would seem, to save him. Martha chastises him, and Mary weeps at his feet, and Jesus proceeds to raise Lazarus from the dead. Then we have this story, the third of the three, in the chapter immediately following that raising. Jesus comes to their home in Bethany, where a dinner is being given for him, presumably in gratitude for the fact that Lazarus is there eating at the table with them due to the miracle Jesus worked. Typically from what we have learned about these three, we read in verse 2, "Martha served". Oh Martha, always the one working. And we read, "Lazarus was one of those at the table with him", which is far more impressive if we recognize that Lazarus was dead just the week before. And as is true in all three of these stories, Lazarus never says a word. He seems to have been the strong, silent type. And then there's Mary, --the emotional, intuitive, expressive sibling, and she is at it again----taking \$20,800 dollars worth of perfume to anoint Christ's feet and wipe them with her hair in an over-the-top gesture of sheer gratitude, love, and exuberance. A gesture that even among friends within this ancient culture, would have seemed most unseemly and extravagant and improper. To ask again the obvious question, how does Mary come to have such an item? And I think we may assume she already has it, not that she went out and purchased it. This assumption is based on Judas' critique: "Why was this perfume not sold and the money given to the poor?", he demands. But he doesn't say, "Why didn't you put that money into the coffers for the poor, rather than going out with it and using it to purchase this perfume?" Which I think would have been the natural question, if Mary had happened to have had \$20,800 cash at her disposal. The way Judas phrases his criticism suggests that Mary already had the perfume; but his point is that she should have sold it and used the proceeds for the poor, rather than use the perfume in the way that she did. See what I'm saying? But how it is that this sibling trio has such an expensive item in their possession, I don't

know, and neither do you, nor does anyone. Perhaps there was someone of wealth within their family who had gifted this to them at some time. And they had held on to it, uncertain what to do with it or when the proper time to use it would be. If that seems far -fetched, consider the possibility of receiving a bottle of expensive wine of some rare vintage from someone. Having again, that enquiring mind, I learned online that the wine that most consistently commands the highest prices in the world at this time is one with a name I could not possibly pronounce, but it fortunately goes by the acronym DRC to collectors. It comes from a vineyard in Burgandy, France that encompasses just 4.5 acres and only about 600 bottles were ever produced, and very few remain. Its average price is \$ 19,700, just about the same as Mary's perfume, but a bottle recently sold at an auction for \$550,314. Now that completely blows my mind, because I don't drink and I have to wonder---just how good can a wine taste? Maybe some of you who are connoisseurs could comprehend that. But consider this---if you were in possession of a bottle of wine worth even around \$20,000 dollars, what would you do with it? Would you sell it, and use the money for some charitable cause or some practical need of your own? Would you hang onto it to use as a nest egg for retirement and to see if it continued to rise in value? Or would you use it, enjoying it to the fullest as best you could? And if you chose the last option, what occasion would you deem worthy of such an extravagant treat? I mean, if you get 6 glasses out of a bottle of wine, that would be a glass of wine worth \$3,300 that you'd be sipping. When would be appropriate to do that? A marriage? The birth of a child? A Golden anniversary? A retirement dinner? Or probably the time when you won an Olympic medal or an Oscar or the Nobel Peace Prize? I mean, how on earth would you know when the moment for such a splurge had arrived? Perhaps this family of three siblings faced a similar dilemma with this pound of rare and costly

perfume. Such a perfume could be used for the anointing of royalty or the burial of some very significant person. But notice that the sisters apparently hadn't used it for the burial of their brother, who had been dead and buried about a week earlier. But now he is back among them, raised from the dead in a miracle foreshadowing Christ's own resurrection, shortly to come. And the One who worked this miracle, who turned these sister's overwhelming sorrow into disbelieving joy is among them, at their table, eating their food, right now, and Mary knows *that this is the moment*; there will be no greater occasion in the future demanding of such a gesture than this one, and she does it up, and she does it up big. Not just part of the jar, but the *whole pound* is poured onto Christ's feet. And she doesn't use a towel, she uses her *hair* to wipe those feet off afterwards. And what does this brave and vulnerable and unconventional act of devotion demonstrate? The importance of expressing love and of doing it while we may, in the present.

If I use my imagination to place myself within this story, as St. Ignatius suggests, I can get myself into Mary's place far enough to understand that now is the time to break out and open that expensive jar of perfume in a gesture of love and gratitude to the Lord. I can see that. But I'm almost sure that in the moment of pouring, I would have stopped about half way through. I mean, who needs an entire pound of perfume poured over their feet? And might there not be some other occasion to use the rest of it, or might I maybe even sell the remaining half and use that money wisely and prudently? By which I mean to say, that I grew up, as probably most of you did, with values like thrift, caution, the importance of delaying immediate gratification, planning ahead, prudence, and restraint. I was thoroughly indoctrinated into these values and they took. I am so much more likely to be guilty of being overly cautious or somewhat meager in my emotional expressions than I am to be accused of being over the top, extravagantly

demonstrative, passionately throwing off all typical conventions and restraints. I might go so far as to suggest that most of us, as part of that whole Minnesota nice thing, might share my same tendencies. But not Mary of Bethany. And when Judas, out of whatever unsavory motivations, criticizes her fervent generosity, Jesus defends her and lifts up the importance of showing love now, while we can.

This reminds me of those who might say, “You plan to send flowers to my funeral? Why not send them to me now, so I can enjoy them?” It reminds me of a story my husband tells about a bottle of wine he received. When he put together, in his first career as a landscaper, an award winning landscape display, his grateful employer presented him with a fine bottle of wine. Confused as to when the proper time to use such a wine might be, Phil hung onto it for some time, forgot about it, then discovered it anew and decided to go for it. Only to find that in the meantime, improperly stored, this fine wine had gone bad and was no good at all. Having failed to enjoy it when he could, he waited until it was too late. This reminds me also of Nina Kempffer, who some of you may know. She is a fine church musician who has served as organist in a number of churches in this area. Several years ago, she asked Sam Black to put together a concert of all of her favorite music, such as would be likely to be played at her funeral, but to do it right then---so she could be around to enjoy it! Which he did, and it was a delightful afternoon of music. And she didn’t want to miss out, by waiting until it was too late.

See where I’m heading here? Why do we delay expressions of love, of devotion, of exuberance? Why do we measure out carefully how much praise or devotion we give to another, even one whom we love dearly, like the old Norwegian who loved his wife so much he almost

told her so once? Expressions of praise, love, and devotion even to our Lord, to whom we owe our very lives and salvation? Is it really so important, when it comes to love, to be sparing and careful? Doesn't this example of Mary's, in fact, free us and encourage us to love God and others now, to express it whole heartedly, to risk being vulnerable and brave in our affections, our devotions, and our praise? Mary's fragrant offering of love continues to present a living memorial to her love for Christ to this day. Maybe we can learn to do likewise, expressing love with generosity and exuberance for those we love, including, and especially, for our Lord.

Amen.