This Lent in our Church School we have been learning about Holy Men and Women, the Saints, the Great Cloud of Witnesses. Last week we were introduced to Mary, Martha and Lazarus, friends of Jesus. We talked about hospitality and how the best friendships come from listening to each other, sharing and caring. And we made pretzels. Pretzels brushed with butter and dipped in cinnamon and sugar. As they baked in the oven in the Old Parish House kitchen, the yummy smell of yeast and cinnamon wafted up the stairs to the classroom. We couldn’t wait to eat them!

Today’s text is filled with fragrant extravagance.

Scientific research shows that our sense of smell is connected with the memory centers of our brains. Have you ever caught a whiff of something that brought you right back to a certain time, or place, or person? When I smelled those pretzels baking, I recalled a time when my dad was a patient in the hospital near my home town. The facility had volunteers that came in each afternoon and baked cookies or brownies in the kitchen on each nursing unit. The fragrance of warm sugar and spice helped to stimulate the appetite, and often patients reported being comforted, having decreased pain and anxiety, even if they didn’t actually eat any of the treats. It just helped patients feel just a little bit like they were at home.

Mary, Martha and Lazarus, the three siblings from Bethany, are featured prominently in John’s gospel. Their home provides a place of rest and renewal for Jesus. We know from the way in which the sick and dying Lazarus is described as “he whom you love”, that this family is important to him. Today’s story takes place again in that home, where a party is being given in Jesus’ honor. His friends are there with him. This is a place of hospitality. Lazarus is gathering the guests to recline with him at the table. Wine is poured. Martha is preparing the meal, the place is warm, and the appetizing smells of roasting lamb and yeasty breads from the kitchen and the open fire are the aromas of home.

And then, out of the blue, Mary comes before Jesus. She breaks open a container of very expensive perfume and pours the entire bottle on his feet. Most scholars estimate its value at a year’s wage for a skilled laborer of the time. It is an unexpected action, an extravagance beyond anything most people could imagine. And it is a shocking thing to the senses as well. I mean, have you ever broken a bottle of perfume? The sudden burst of fragrance can be pretty overpowering. The end of verse 3 says it all, “*And the house was filled with fragrance.”*

This is a significant reversal. Remember, when Jesus approached the cave in Bethany where Lazarus had been laid to rest, Martha exclaimed, *“Lord, already there is a stench, because he has been dead for four days.”* (Jn 11:39) But this is Bethany, a name of Hebrew or Aramaic origin, meaning “house of affliction”– Bethany, a place where lepers are healed, and the dead are raised to new life. As one scholar wrote, “a fragrant smell and grateful love now fill a house that had once been filled with mourning and the smell of death’s decay.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Episcopal priest, Martin Smith, reflects on how God exceeds through excess.[[2]](#footnote-2) He names the *far-too-muchness* of Mary’s gift of fabulously fragrant and expensive Indian burial nard. Her gift of loving abandon is scandalously bold. And it is forever linked to the One she lavishes with her hands and her hair, the One by whose excessive, *far-too-muchness*, extravagant Love is given at the cross.

Judas is clearly disturbed at this act of devotion, at what he perceives as a waste of resources. Jesus is quick to respond. Mary once again has the better part as she sits at the feet of her friend and teacher. She knew that this man she had come to love was a new thing that God had placed in this world. And just as her devotion opened her to perceive that new thing, she also knew, in some way, because of Jesus’ *far-too-muchness* ministry to the wrong kind of people, this new thing would not be allowed to last. Mary is present to the present.

There is more to this story than fragrance. It is a foreshadowing of what is to come. This, now, with the excess of a pound of costly perfume, is the moment of Jesus’ burial anointing. His body will never be prepared for burial. The women approaching the tomb with more than 100 pounds of burial spices, will never have the opportunity to use them.

So, Jesus says, *you see, Love cannot be held back for a later date*. Now is the time. Now is the moment of excessive giving. Now is the time for *far-too-muchness* love.

Jesus’ ministry is one of extravagance:

* Good wine, the best wine at Cana wedding
* 5000 men and uncounted others fed
* Extraordinary catch of fish
* Abundance of Christ’s presence
* Servant leader that washes the feet of the beloved
* Sacrifice and bodily resurrection – conquering the sin that leads to death

God presents all these gifts,

that we might not regard as waste, that which brings life.

That we might not merely survive but have abundant life.

That we might see and bring forth to others those extravagant things that God is doing right in our midst.

And I don’t want to ignore Jesus’ rebuke to Judas; that *the poor will always be with us*. This is no off-handed excuse to become desensitized to the need around us. We know Jesus’ ministry was on the side of the poor and against poverty and its causes. What we see here in John, looks to be a portion of what Jesus is likely quoting from Deuteronomy, *“Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land’.”*(Deut 15:11) The point is that we will always have the opportunity before us to serve. This will never cease.

As I was preparing for preaching this week, I invited people to share with me the most extravagant gift they had ever received and/or given.

Here are just a few of those replies…

* “*My grandparent’s home”*
* *“My two children”*
* *“I lost my wedding ring and was gifted a replacement diamond from my then sister-in-law, from an heirloom family ring. 20 years later, long after the marriage ended and I had moved beyond my own pain, I returned the diamond to her – restoring it to the family and restoring the relationship”*
* *“A woman at the church where I grew up gave me a car in my second year of college. She and her husband didn’t need the vehicle or the money from it and wanted to give it to someone at church who needed it. She didn’t even know me, but she knew my mom. It was amazing. I drove it for almost 10 years, It was such a huge blessing in my life.”*
* *“The most extravagant gift I have ever received is the one I continue to give. The gift of sobriety”*
* *“My father’s unspoken words of forgiveness when he was 80, and the gift of time God still gives us these last 6 years and counting.”*
* *“My father gave up his vacation one year to send me to England for two weeks. I tried to turn him down, but a family friend told me that doing so would deprive him of the pleasure of giving me the gift. I went, I had fun, And I’ve never forgotten it.”*

I was not just a bit overwhelmed as I read these precious words and I’m so grateful that people shared them. These are the ties that bind us in so many ways. They are held as treasured memories, as bridges to those we have lost, as comfort in the present, and as connections to those we might barely know.

The fragrance of Love’s action is carried far beyond its origin. I would think that Mary’s hair, as she wiped the perfumed ointment off of the feet of her beloved friend, would have taken on the blessing of that lingering sweetness. So that, as she followed Jesus into Jerusalem, toward the cross, wherever she went in these next weeks, any who caught her scent would have thought of Jesus.

As we journey into this last week before Jesus enters Jerusalem, I wonder….where will God’s excessive and over-the-top love show up in your life?

And what might be your offering of *far-too-muchness* at the feet of Jesus?

Amen.

1. Frances Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John*.(Louisville, KY: Westminster John Know Press, 2007), 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Smith, Martin, *Living in the Word,* *“God Exceeds through excess”.* Sojourners, April, 2019. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)