

Sermon: March 13, 2016 (Lent V) – John 12: 1-8
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

Sunday to Sunday, I strive to help us to make sense of our life experiences in light of our faith, and to make sense of our faith in light of our life experiences. The primary tools for this type of investigation are our thoughts and our feelings. Sometimes, however, a scripture comes along that challenges me to be less concerned about my thoughts and feelings, and pay attention to the information given me by my body. Today's reading from John is such a scripture.

Imagine yourself, then, in that room with Jesus, Mary, Martha, Lazarus, disciples and villagers. More specifically, try to evoke the smell of that dusty middle-eastern peasant's shack. A meal of celebration has been prepared, for this man Lazarus recently brought back to life by Jesus, so the smell of onions and garlic and cumin, lamb and wine and fresh fruits tantalize us. If we are to follow the sequence of the gospel of John, Lazarus was just recently restored to life so the stench of death may also be lingering in the room.

And then: a huge aroma of perfume filled the whole room. Not a drop here and there, not a wee scented tea-light burning in the corner, but a large, costly bottle of scent poured out, in the anointing of Jesus' feet. Martha brightened the room with the exotic scents of cooking, then her sister Mary filled every cubic inch of air in that room with the beautiful but demanding fragrance of an abundance of perfume.

Remember in your body, times you have been overwhelmed by the sense of smell, positive and negative. Few things are as dominant as a strong smell. The person sitting in front of you in the movie theatre, doused with cologne. The Body Odour of the person in the next seat to you on that long bus ride. The smell of danger, when the pilot light has gone out on your gas stove, or when there has been solvent or fuel spilled. The smell of jasmine or tuberose flowers around your neck, a garland of welcome. The smell of a baby fresh from a bath. The sense of smell can dominate us like nothing else, and [notes Derbyshire] "studies have shown that memories triggered by smells are more vivid and more emotional than those triggered by sounds, pictures or words." When Mary fills the room with perfume, there's not much they can do to ignore it.

Judas Iscariot tries to bring the room back: away from this overwhelming sensory experience, back to the world of logic. Although the gospel of John tells us that his motives were not pure, Judas does what I would likely have done in that moment: uncomfortable with this sensory experience, he and I retreat into the safer and more comfortable domain of the mind; uneasy with the extravagance of wasting something so precious, all at once, he and I loudly lament the good that could have been done if that expensive perfume had been sold and the proceeds spent on the poor and the hungry. And to this, Jesus says to me and my think-alike partner Judas, "no." As he said in his parable of the prodigal son and the over-the-top banquet spread at the prodigal's return, Jesus argues against conventional wisdom in favour of extravagance.

My practical, logical, reserved mindset always has trouble with extravagance. Whether it's a pungent scent, a sharp flavour, or a big, brash personality, I recoil a bit in the presence of something bigger and bolder than it needs to be. Yet that is exactly where Jesus places himself in this room. Given a choice between the stale, dead ordinariness of regular life, and the perfume of extravagant living filling the room, Jesus chooses to "go big."

Two Sundays ago, I briefly mentioned a book about congregational life entitled *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, in which United Methodist Bishop Robert Schnase identifies five practices that typify healthy communities of faith. These five practices of fruitfulness are:

- ✓ **Radical** hospitality
- ✓ **Passionate** worship
- ✓ **Intentional** faith development

- ✓ **Risk-taking** mission and service
- ✓ **Extravagant** generosity.

What I want you to notice today, as we stay with the physical aspects of our gospel reading, are the adjectives in each of those: radical, passionate, intentional, risk-taking, extravagant. Nothing bland, nothing small. So as we seek to follow Jesus, we give ourselves wholeheartedly to love, we don't segregate a portion of ourselves and give only that. We drink deep of the well of the spirit, no little sips for us. We spill the whole bottle of perfume, we don't spritz a little bit into the air and walk into it.

On this day, as our Annual Meeting reviews the life and work of this congregation in 2015 and anticipates what is to come in 2016 and beyond, stay close to this image of extravagance. Mary embodies how big our gratitude is in the presence of Christ, giving an unavoidably big gift of life in the shadow of death. Recall what it is like to be overwhelmed by scent, and let that be a metaphor of how richly transformative Christ's presence is, when we let our life as a congregation be claimed by his radical, passionate, intentional, risk-taking, extravagant love. Judas wants this Jesus experience to add up, but Mary gets it right: new life in Jesus Christ doesn't add up, because it is way bigger, bolder and richer than meets the eye.

One point that Judas makes, about meeting the needs of the poor, does warrant a reply, but the reply will be in the form of poetry, rather than a linear construct. It's the 5th stanza of the hymn we sung this morning, by Sydney Carter:

"The poor of the world are my body,' [Christ] said, 'to the end of the world they shall be; the bread and the blankets you give to the poor you'll know, you have given to me,' he said, 'You'll know you have given to me.'"

When we are in Christ – when we open our choices to be shaped by the person of Jesus, when we release our need to control and step, physically and spiritually, into Christ's desire to serve, life changes – for Christ is the giver, the recipient and the gift. Christ's hands reach out in comfort to those who need help, and Christ's thirst is quenched when a parched child is given a cup of clean, safe water. The one who escorted Lazarus from death to new life, is the one who walks us into a life where abundance has a new shape, based not on wealth but on extravagantly giving away: extravagance in giving ourselves to this new way of love, extravagance in supporting one another's life burdens, extravagance in our invitation to any and all seeking a new path.

In worship, we open ourselves to the transformative power of our loving God. In communion, bread broken and wine poured are physical reminders of how completely Jesus gave himself to the process of forgiveness, reconciliation and new life. As we meet after today's service to consider how Christ's life in our midst touches the souls who are here and can impact the souls who are not yet on the walk of faith, we re-commit ourselves to Mary's path, unreservedly pouring out the best we have to offer because Christ brings us to new life. May the full fragrance of all of this move us, body, spirit, and mind, closer to God's heart for the world. Amen.

References cited:

Carter, Sydney. *Said Judas to Mary* (VU #129), © 1964/1969 Stainer & Bell/Hope Publishing.

Derbyshire, David. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1225564/Can-really-smell-memories-How-childhood-scents-etched-brain.html>

Schnase, Robert. *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2007

© 2016, Rev Greg Wooley, Ralph Connor Memorial United Church.