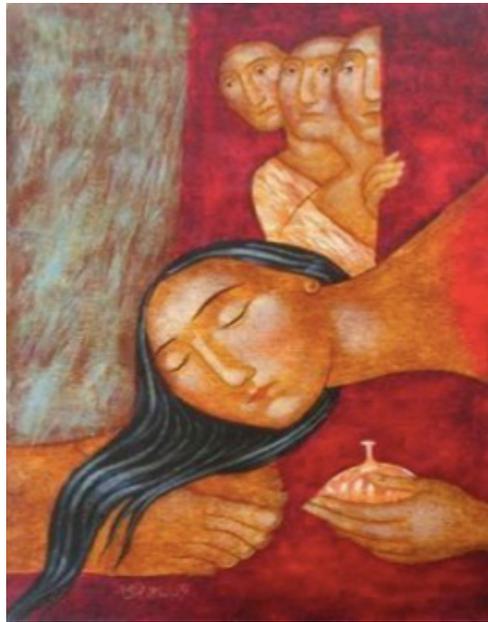


Sermon: Shower the People
Text: John 12:1-8
Date: April 7, 2019
Context: WWPC
Lent Five
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

*Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard,
anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair.*

John 12:3



Original painting by Julia Stankova

This is a shocking story. Even someone who knows nothing about the social and cultural morays of the day, would likely agree that what Mary does at this small dinner party is shocking.

We're going to come back to those morays in just a moment, but the story is also shocking for another reason.

Imagine that you're there that night. Now suppose that you find yourself sitting across from Lazarus. Imagine how shocking that would be.

Suppose you were there that day when Jesus got word that Lazarus was deathly ill. You traveled with him to Bethany, where Lazarus and his sisters lived. And you then followed him out Lazarus's tomb.

You saw the tears rolling down Jesus's cheeks, when he realized that he was too late, that his dear friend was in fact sealed in that crypt. You heard him give the command to roll the stone away.

And you heard Martha's startled response:

'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' You felt the question implied underneath the words: *What took you so long? You could have saved him.*

Turns out stench was an understatement.

You were nearly flattened by the smell that burst from the tomb when Andrew and Philip rolled that stone away and Lazarus, a man who had in fact been dead for four days, came staggering out into the sun, still wrapped up like a mummy in his grave clothes.

The smell was overwhelming. It reminded you of that time you came upon a whale carcass rotting on the beach, and the odor was so wretched you actually threw up.

Now you find yourself sitting next to Lazarus, to this very same man who was dressed like a mummy and smelled like a rotting whale. Only now he's clothed in a freshly laundered robe that smells of soap and wind and sunlight. It's astonishing, way above your powers of comprehension.

But that's just the first of the smells and the first of the surprises you're about to experience.

The house itself smells of stew, rosemary and lamb and onions all simmering together, and of freshly baked bread, a smell you've loved since your childhood, when your mother baked fresh bread for you and your sister in preparation for the Sabbath.

Martha, the hostess for the meal, sets a bowl of steaming deliciousness down in front of you. You take a moment to savor this lovely aroma and you think that this could possibly be the best thing you've ever smelled in your whole life.

But just then everything changes. Mary, busy Martha's more contemplative sister, Mary interrupts the proceedings. You set your spoon down and you feel your stomach tighten. Everything about her sudden appearance is wrong.

First she shouldn't be there at all. If she is not serving the men, then she does not belong in this room, in their company.

Her hair is wrong. It should be bound up tight, properly modest, not hanging loose like you see on the women on the backstreets of Jerusalem, or on your wife in the privacy of your bedroom.

She has no business touching Jesus in that way, wiping his feet with her hair. It is shockingly intimate, offensively intimate, scandalously intimate.

Never mind what she's done with that jar of wildly expensive perfume, pouring the whole thing out on Jesus's feet. Yes, it's an utterly beautiful scent. It occurs to you that it smells like love itself.

But such a waste! Such an extravagant, unnecessary waste! A year's salary, spent for nothing!

Given how scandalous this story is, I think it's worth asking why the gospel writers included it in their accounts of Jesus's life. Particularly since it's not really about him. Yes, he rebukes Judas for being a money-grubber, but otherwise Jesus plays only a passive role in this story. We don't even see his response to Mary.

So why is the story in there?

Conventional wisdom says that it's because Mary is anointing Jesus for his burial. Yes, perhaps she remembered the stench of Lazarus's tomb and she's going to get ahead of that terrible odor. No way she's going to let Jesus's dead body smell like that.

But how would she know that he is about to die? Jesus is days away from his final, fatal conflict with the authorities. Can she predict the future? Does she read tea leaves?

I mean, really, how could she know what lies ahead of him? Sometimes it seems like Jesus himself isn't entirely clear about what lies ahead of him.

She couldn't know, is the short version.

So maybe she is just in love with him. That is entirely possible. Given who he is, and given who she is, it would be surprising if she did not have feelings for Jesus.

But would that be interesting enough to merit inclusion in the Gospels, especially given how scandalous the story is? Given the message that would send? And yet, even though the details differ in each account, this story appears in all four gospels. One of the very few stories that does.

Why? Especially since it's not even about Jesus. Maybe because it's about us.

I believe it's in there, at least in part, because Mary embodies for all of us a crucial lesson about love. She has something to teach us, something to show us both how to love and how to live.

Live like no one is watching. And share your love extravagantly. Because life passes quickly and love is infinitely more valuable than money.

Whatever is in your heart, don't keep it bottled up. Break it open. Let it out, let it show, let it flow, even if it's costly.

One of North Carolina's favorite sons, and a member of the singer/songwriter hall of fame has written a song that speaks to this lesson. I don't know if the song was inspired by this story. But I would not be at all surprised if it had been.

And it goes like this....

You can play the game and you can act out the part,
even though you know it wasn't written for you.
Tell me, how can you stand there with your broken heart
ashamed of playing the fool?

One thing can lead to another; it doesn't take any sacrifice.
Oh, father and mother, sister and brother, if it feels nice, don't think twice,
just shower the people you love with love, show them the way that you feel.

Things are gonna work out fine if you only will do as I say,
just shower the people you love with love, show them the way you feel.
Things are gonna be much better if you only will.

You can run but you cannot hide, this is widely known.
Tell me, what you plan to do with your foolish pride
when you're all by yourself, alone.

Once you tell somebody the way that you feel,
you can feel it beginning to ease.
I think it's true what they say about the squeaky wheel
always getting the grease.
Better to shower the people you love with love,
show them the way that you feel.

Things are gonna be just fine if you only will what I'd like to do to you.
Shower the people you love with love, show them the way that you feel.
Things are gonna be much better if you only will.
Shower the people you love with love, show them the way that you feel.
You'll feel better right away.
Don't take much to do, sell you pride.

They say in every life, they say the rain must fall,
just like pouring rain, make it rain.
Make it rain, love, love, love is sunshine, oh yes,
Make it rain, love, love, love is sunshine. Everybody, everybody.

Shower the People, James Taylor