

Lent 5 – John 12: 1-8

What a beautiful moment! I don't know about you but when I read that, the images are very strong in my head and heart. It feels intimate, the emotions are high, the atmosphere charged....can you put yourself into that scene? Let me read it once again – and “listen yourself into the scene” if you can.

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him) said: “Why was this perfume not sold for 300 denarii and the money given to the poor?”(He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said: “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

For me, it's a night time scene, and the room is lamp-lit. There are pools of light, lots of shadows.....I can feel the way Mary must have felt, I think. Pouring out that gift....the intimacy of that moment, her vulnerability....and the sting of Judas' criticism.

This text is about many things. And we'll get to some of them in a minute. First though, it's about....well...

I remember once when I was ...maybe 8? I wrote a little song and I thought it was beautiful. It was a love song, and as I recall the object of my affection was Donnie Kondra who lived across the road – an OLDER MAN – he was NINE...so I wrote a love song. And I sang it to my mom. I will never forget how it felt just before I started to sing, my heart was hammering – (in those days I didn't feel comfortable singing at all) and I will also never forget the look on my mom's face. It must have been a truly terrible song because she got that look...you know the one – where you're trying not to laugh? I was crushed. I was so embarrassed; not only had I exposed my passion for the boy across the street, but also my lack of song writing and singing talent. I can still feel the shame.

Have you ever had an experience where you put yourself on the line in some public way...it's like exposing your underbelly. Imagine for example if you're not a singer, or FEEL that you're not a singer.....but suddenly breaking into song at a dinner party – or reading out loud in front of everyone a piece of poetry you wrote that exposed your feelings about somethinghow open, how vulnerable that would make you feel.

Or evenyou're shopping – you see something that is just right as a gift for someone, a bit much but it gives you so much joy to get it for them, you want to please them, you get that feeling of joy inside thinking about how surprised they will be....

And then....in the giving, someone snickers, or rolls their eyes, or is embarrassed because your gift was all wrong – too much, a silly idea, embarrassing.

How would that feel? To have a gift, and you just share it impulsively, you put yourself on the line in some personal way – and THEN – someone criticizes? What it took for you to do that in the first place was a gift in itself, the courage that you needed to offer what you did, and then someone either sneers, or laughs, or criticizes? That gift, that you gave with your whole heart, is somehow not good enough, is an offense to someone, or is so inappropriate that someone is embarrassed by it?

I can feel that right here.

(read it again)

Can you feel that? It's about those times when you gave your very best and someone slapped you down.

But it's more than that.

As much as I can feel Mary's joy as she pours out that extravagant gift and as much as I can feel the sting of Judas' comment (not even to her – did you notice? He doesn't even speak to her he speaks ABOUT her to others, in her hearing – as though she's not there. Just another way of degrading her and her gift)

As much as I can feel that

I can also feel how it must have been when Jesus defended her.

(Read it again)

Do you see? So....in the end, this is about you, giving the very best of who you are – and hearing God say *"That is beautiful. Thank you. YOU are beautiful. Thank you for this gift"*.

Whoever is telling you otherwise? They are not right. Don't listen to the voices from the shadows questioning you, making you question yourself. Don't listen to them. Listen to me, God says. Your gift – and you? Beautiful. More than good enough.

We've been using the theme of birds throughout Lent. I want to lift up a couple of things from this passage through that lens now.

For John, "signs" are an important thing. Whenever he writes, telling us about something, it's always a sign of something else. You have to sort of uncover the layers of what he's trying to say. I'm going to use 5 birds to get at some of those layers here: Phoenix, robin, raven, peacock and mockingbird.

- 1) The Phoenix: That is the legendary bird that rises out of its own ashes. A sign of Resurrection. What I mean by that in particular here is this: In chapter 11 John tells the story of the raising of Lazarus. You can't see this passage without knowing that Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, and – John tells us- that was the last straw. For the authorities who had been disturbed by his teaching and actions –if I were prone to overuse of a metaphor I would say it seriously

ruffled their feathers. The raising of Lazarus was the final affront that made them say “We’re taking him down”. And from that time on, they were overtly out to get him.

So...it’s in the very same home – the home of Lazarus, and Martha, and Mary – that this scene takes place. In the air that night, mixed with all the sounds of dinner being served – is the sound of the phoenix, an insistent chirping, reminding us of what power this man Jesus had. He had raised someone from the dead! You can imagine, I think, that people would want to see Lazarus, as well as Jesus - I think Lazarus might have been quite a local celebrity – and he’s there at the table. It doesn’t say where Mary was, only that she took the perfume. It also says that Martha “served”. In one commentary I read, the scholar says “Martha acted like a waitress”. When in fact, that word “served” is the same one used for “ministered” to them: - same action as the breaking and pouring ... that “waitress” comment reveals more about the scholar than the text, methinks! (And this is a total aside, but here we have two women, whose actions are the same ones Jesus is about to do: serve at a table, and wash feet. Doesn’t that make you go “hmmmm”? *That’s* no accident. John knows what he’s doing as an author. So – the phoenix, symbol of life, rising out of death – and Lazarus right there at the table with them so recently out of the tomb....it frightened some of them and rocked their understanding of how things are. All of that is in the background as we see this table scene.

- 2) Along with the chirping of the phoenix (I don’t know if they chirp – maybe they squawk? Dumbledore has a phoenix - can you remember?) Anyway....along with the sound of the resurrection phoenix, I hear a raven and a robin. Ravens, some people say, are signs of death. Have you ever heard that? There’s an old saying about them: one raven sorrow, two ravens joy... However the rest of that goes, what I mean by that is that here in the dining room that night is one raven. Sorrow. The threat of what’s about to happen. Jesus is moving toward his death. John implies that Mary knew that, and that’s why she did what she did. Certainly they knew he was in danger. Whether or not they believed it would end in his death is a question. Many thought he’d come out fighting at the end, when pushed to the wall. But the caw of the raven is there in the background – Edgar Allan Poe has a raven saying what? “Nevermore”. The threat is there, in that room. Not only the threat of Jesus’ death, but also their own. They don’t know if by being associated with him they’ll be arrested and crucified too....What difference would that make there? Would they be sitting at that table eating and watching Lazarus, still shaking their heads about what had happened, but also jumping at every noise outside? Would the authorities choose this night with all of them there in one place, to get him? To get them? Was Mary’s action motivated by a feeling that – this is very costly stuff – worth a year’s salary they say – maybe she had been saving it for who knows what – but that night said “this could be all gone tomorrow – what have I been saving for?” The raven’s caw is at the door – death is looming for Jesus, maybe for me too, she says, and I WILL NOT leave this for the Romans to plunder. Better that I pour it out – along with my love and commitment to see this through to the end – pour it out on my loving friend. Anointing him for the death that was coming for him – maybe for me too.

- 3) So in this chorus of birds, we have a phoenix and raven, and now a robin. Robins are signs of spring. Even sometimes when snow is still on the ground, the robin is a sign that something else is also true. Spring is on the way. What Mary did – that pouring out of the perfume – is a sign of his coming death yes, but also a sign that it would not be the end.; that even in the worst of circumstances there is beauty; there can be praise, and life and the fragrance of something more to come.
- 4) Two more join the chorus now: first a peacock. To me, a peacock is a good symbol of outrageous, extravagant beauty. There is no reason why there should be such plumage. Biologists will tell you that it's to attract the female; or that it's for camouflage, or to protect itself – but honestly – those tail feathers are just plain overkill, don't you think? Only a creator who loves diversity and beauty would make a peacock. And Mary's gift – it's a peacock. A totally over the top astounding gesture of beauty. Spontaneous, perhaps, unselfconscious – just in-your-face breathtaking generosity and beauty. That stuff was worth a year's wages! Have you ever had a gift like that given to you? Or given something like that? The people in that room must have had their mouths hanging open. She pours it on his feet (other gospels say his head, but John says the feet – and it's John who has Jesus wash their feet not long after...). Washing the feet was a sign of hospitality, but this was such an intimate gesture – on your knees in front of someone, as a choice, as a gesture of love – I think she's saying "I understand – I understand what you've been trying to teach us now, and I commit myself to that, and to you. Forever." Beautiful. Peacock beautiful.
- 5) And finally – mockingbirds. Mockingbirds, they say, have no song of their own, but rather mimic what they hear. Mary was empowered and enabled to make such a generous loving gesture – why? In response to the generosity and love that had been extended to her already by Jesus. His total acceptance of her, the way he reached out to her, encouraged and supported her – the grace he extended – was what let her do the same thing for him in that moment. A mocking bird song.

We're about to follow this man to places we never thought he – nor we – would go.

Hold this scene in your heart as we move through these last weeks approaching Easter.

Let yourself feel the feelings, inhale the aroma of that perfume, hear the bird sounds, heralds of darkness and of the dawn

And move back into your own living and let it be a gift most precious poured out in love

And may God, whom we see most clearly in Jesus, may God bathe you in fragrant love and hope –

Amen.