

# “The Scent of Love”

March 11, 2018  
John 12: 1-11

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Our scripture reading today follows from last Sunday’s reading about the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Jesus is again at Lazarus and Martha and Mary’s house and they are having a banquet feast. The scripture says that this takes place 6 days before the Passover. You remember that the Passover ends up being the Last Supper before he is handed over to be crucified. So in this scripture we are very near to the end.

The primary action in this story comes from Mary, who anoints Jesus with a very expensive perfume, and then Judas, who criticizes her for being wasteful. But before we move into that main action I want you to notice that Martha; Mary’s sister, is also present. In an almost throw-away detail, it says Martha “served”. Serving in Greek is *Diakonéo* or *Diakonia* ‘service’. (It’s where the term Deacon and Diaconal come from). Last week I noted Martha’s strong faith statement and belief in Jesus as Lord and Messiah, and this week we see her faith shown in her service. A strong faith combined with the willingness to serve is a powerful combination.

We are blessed to have many in this church with both those qualities. Remember that those of you, who do things like make coffee, prepare snacks or meals, set out and clean up dishes and a hundred other small behind-the-scenes tasks have a holy calling. You serve not just the immediate obvious need — you are also serving Jesus. Jesus modelled servant leadership. Soon Jesus will wrap a towel around himself and wash the disciples’ feet. In John 12: 26 Jesus says: “**Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.**” Never look down on those who serve, for it is a high calling.



Now on to the main action. Mary takes a very expensive perfume and anoints Jesus’ feet. This was a shocking gesture, and Judas was probably not the only one in the room to wonder what had come over the woman. This was no dollar store perfume. It was made of pure nard from the Himalayas, and Judas figures it was worth 300 denari. It would take a labourer approximately one year to earn that kind of

money. I can't even imagine today a perfume that could cost that much, maybe \$30,000. I bet it exists, but I can't imagine.

So you can understand a little why it was so expensive. That nard would have travelled by foot — whether human or donkey or camel, all the way from the Himalayas to Bethany for this occasion. She has a pound of the stuff and here she is washing, not just dabbing, but washing and spilling this incredible oil all over Jesus' feet — so much so that the entire room is filled with the woody, spicy scent. I picture silence falling over the room as the aroma filled it. I imagine everyone looking at Jesus, expecting him to say something; expecting him at the very least to say to Mary "Thank you . . . but this is too much, save your perfume for a special occasion", and perhaps even expecting Jesus to say what Judas ended up saying: "Mary, what are you doing? Why are you wasting this? You should have sold it and given the money to the poor. You are a foolish woman."

Now listen to this beautiful meditation on this story that comes from the Iona Community:

*It was on the Wednesday that they called him a wasteful person. The place smelled like the perfume section of a department store. It was as if somebody had bumped an elbow against a bottle and sent it crashing to the floor, setting off the most expensive stink bomb on earth. But it happened in a house, not a shop. And the woman who broke the bottle was no casual afternoon shopper. She was the poorest of the poor, giving away the only precious thing she had. And he sat still while she poured the liquid all over his head ... as unnecessary as aftershave on a full crop of hair and a bearded chin. And those who smelled it, and those who saw it, and those who remembered that he was against extravagance, called him a wasteful person. They forgot that he was also the poorest of the poor. And they who had much and had given him nothing, objected to a pauper giving him everything. Jealousy was in the air when a poor woman's generosity became an embarrassment to their tight-fistedness. That was on the Wednesday, when they called him a wasteful person.*

Jesus does not call Mary foolish; no, he defends her and praises her action and as a result is willing to look foolish himself. In Matthew and Mark's version of this story, Jesus says she will always be remembered for her action.

The Scripture makes it clear that when Judas criticizes her for not giving the money to the poor, *he doesn't actually care about the poor, he cares about the money*, and wants to skim some of it off the top. It's always interesting when someone gives you advice about what you should do with

your money or your time and how generous you should be, when they themselves don't seem to be doing much in the way of giving.

We live in a very critical society. Somehow social media seems to feed and encourage our desire to be critical of others. As Christians we are called to live differently. We need to be very, very wary of 'should-ing' on others, whether in person or in an anonymous online commentary. As Jesus said *"Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get."* Matthew 7:1-2

But what do we do with Jesus' response to Judas' criticism? Jesus replies "You will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me." Some have interpreted this to mean that Jesus did not care about the poor, but this is so clearly not the case. In fact some believe that he was referencing a verse in the book of Deuteronomy 15:11 which reads: *"For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor.'"* Jesus' care for the poor is so evident in his teaching and in his actions.

At the heart of this story is the heart. The human heart weighs less than a pound. It beats 100,000 times a day and over 2.5 billion times in the average lifetime. Your system of blood vessels — arteries, veins and capillaries — is over 60,000 miles long, enough to go around the world more than twice. This is the heart of the human life. Without it, your body quickly stops working and living. Jesus talks a lot about the heart, but he uses it as a metaphor for the inner life. It is a metaphor for the center of who we are in our mind and in our spirit.

Jesus was once asked what the greatest commandment was and he responded: ***"Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: "Love your neighbour as yourself"*** (Mark 12:29-30). Cathie Kelso will be speaking next Sunday and she's going to talk more about that central commandment of Jesus. But I can't help but think of that verse when I look at this story of the anointing of Jesus.

It is pretty clear that Judas' heart was not healthy. As he spoke and acted in the days leading up to when he betrayed Jesus, he was clearly filled with fear, jealousy, resentments and hatred. There was very little love in his heart. But Mary was loving her Lord with all her heart, mind, soul and body. It was extravagant even to the point of looking foolish, as real love often is.



In 1900, George C. Bolt began the construction of a full-sized 120 room Rhineland Castle in the Thousand Islands. How many of you have been to Boldt Castle? It really is quite the place, and it has quite the story, a story of lavish love. He built the castle for his wife Louise, deliberately choosing the

island that was shaped like a heart, and already called Heart Island! No detail or expense was spared, from the indoor pool to the children's tower to the gardens.



But in 1904 his beloved Louise died tragically. Heart-broken, George immediately abandoned the whole project and never returned or laid eyes on it again. Like the perfume poured over Jesus, this was total, extravagant love.

In a day and age when people bathed only rarely, a pound of pure and expensive perfume may well have lingered on Jesus as he lay dying on the cross. Anointed into Jesus' feet (and another version of this story says into his hair), he may have still have been able to smell it during his greatest time of suffering. They say that smell is the sense with the strongest memory. The memory of Mary's anointing and of the love behind the act may have helped to carry him through his darkest hour.

Jesus wants all of us to be filled with the kind of love that Mary had in her heart. Jesus wants you to be filled with the kind of love that is in *his* heart. That kind of love is so great it can permeate the whole world in the same way that Mary's perfume filled the room.

The more you are filled with that kind of love, the more you will find that the violence, the bullying, the hunger, the loneliness and all the evil that is in this world will cause your heart to break. The more you are filled with that kind of love, the more you will find that the good things in this world cause you to smile and laugh and cry tears of joy. The more you are filled with that kind of love, the more you might be inclined to do something that appears foolish, so that you can make a difference.

That kind of love may be foolish, but it is also incredibly powerful. That kind of love is so powerful it can bring hope into a hopeless situation; it can bring joy into a place that is filled with grief and pain; it can bring courage to those who feel powerless; it can bring dreams and visions to those who are empty and lonely; it can change the world. That kind of love is so powerful it can change **you**.

Dying on a cross might well be the greatest example of an extravagant and foolish love. Jesus walked towards his arrest, torture and death on a cross not because he was guilty of any crime or wrong-doing, but because of his incredible love for you and for me. His death brings us life and sets us free. May we receive that gift and that love and may we live lives of service that reflect the wondrous love of Jesus.

Thanks be to God. Amen.