

The Church of the Good Shepherd

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Fifth Sunday in Lent – April 7, 2019

John 12:1-8

Come Holy Spirit and enliven our lives and our senses with the fragrant presence of Your love. Amen.

At my last parish in Texas, we had a tendency to hire staff within a fairly narrow range of names. For a couple of years, we had two Morgan's, one male Rector we called Big Mo and our female youth minister we called She-Mo. We had two Kathy's who we often resorted to calling by their initials so we could distinguish between them. We had two Lisa's in our administrative office who worked together closely enough that they sometimes became a single entity known as "The Lisa's". We even had two Mikes, as well. Fortunately, their age difference was great enough that we could simply refer to one as Mike-the-Greater and Mike-the-Lessor.

All these similar and duplicated names could cause confusion. If we were not clear about whom we are speaking, we could get our stories and people pretty jumbled up. Likewise, when we are talking about biblical stories and characters, we need to be careful to pay close attention to whom the story is about. In our scriptures, there seem to be boat-loads of Simon's, Lazarus's, James', and John's - there's even a couple of Judas's.

Few names, however, are used so frequently in our Gospels as "Mary", so we need to be careful to keep our Mary's straight. There are so many of them in our four gospels, that we often confuse them, or, worse, conflate them into some universal Mary. The Mary of our story today – Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and of Lazarus – is a distinctly different Mary. This Mary is obviously not the Madonna, Mary the mother of Jesus...so we can eliminate that one. This Mary is also not Mary Magdalene, who, while all four gospels list her as being among the women who witness the empty tomb, Luke also describes her as the one of the women traveling with Jesus and who had been healed of seven demons.

There are a number of other Mary's as well. There is a Mary, the mother of Clopas, who is listed as one of the four women standing by the cross along with Jesus' mother, her sister, and Mary Magdalene. There is Mary the mother of James (the younger), plus a couple of other Mary's scattered here and there, who may or may not be the same person. Is there any wonder that we get our Mary's mixed up?

In addition to having multiple Mary's, all four of our Gospels tell similar stories of a woman who anoints Jesus, but the details are different enough to make the stories distinctive. Both Matthew's and Mark's gospels tell the story of an unnamed woman who anoints Jesus' head with oil at the home of Simon the Leper in Bethany. In Luke's anointing story, an unnamed woman known to be a sinner bursts in uninvited during a dinner at the home of a different Simon (Simon the Pharisee) to anoint Jesus' feet. In this story, however, she kisses Jesus' feet and bathes them with her tears, before wiping them dry with her hair and anointing them with perfumed ointment. While very similar to our gospel story today, Luke's story bears a distinctive theme of forgiveness that marks it as a different story.

None of these women are Mary of Bethany. The Mary of our story today has a unique role. This Mary has a name, a brother and sister, and a history with Jesus. This Mary is a much beloved and intimate friend of Jesus. And this Mary is about to do something so intimate, so surprising and loving, that the effects linger to this day.

Jesus has been at the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Bethany before, and today, we find Jesus and his followers there yet again for a meal. Our Evangelist, John, tells us that it is six days before the Passover, connecting what is about to happen with what will happen in just a very few days at the last supper. Both of these stories are set in the midst of the gathered who are beloved of Jesus. Both are about suppers, depicting intimacy and love as feasting with Jesus. Both involve

washing and wiping as acts of love and service. With this story, we are in the moment, but also looking ahead to what is to come.

So, imagine this scene with me. While Jesus and the disciples are gathered at the table, and with Martha serving, Mary slips away from the room. She comes back in bringing with her a pound of nard. Whether or not it was stored in an alabaster jar, this ointment was truly precious. Nard is a distilled essential oil that is derived from a flowering plant which grows in the Himalayas of Nepal, China, and India, and is intensely aromatic. It was, and continues to be, used as a perfume, a medicine, and in the religious contexts. A pound of nard would have been very expensive, costing roughly an average year's wages in the first century.

So, back to our imaginings. Mary enters the room and approaches the seated Jesus, kneeling down before him. As she opens the jar, the intense aroma of the perfume wafts into the room. Silently, she pours oil all over Jesus' feet. She rubs the oil deeply into the calluses, cuts, and scrapes of the feet that have been present to the glory and misery, miracle and grief, prayer and protest of Jesus' ministry.

She massages the oil into the bottoms of his feet, soothing the dry cracks in his heels. She spreads the oil carefully over his toenails and rubs it into his dry and battered cuticles. The oil washes away the dust and dirt of his long journey – the many miles walked on the dusty roads of Galilee and Judea – all the while cleansing and preparing him for the journey that remains. Jesus's feet are now dripping with the oil that has been poured out so lavishly. It runs down from the tops of his feet, flowing over the fine bones and running between his toes, dribbling onto the floor. The floor itself seems to have been anointed. The puddled oil beneath his feet spreads out toward the other disciples.

Mary now takes down her long hair. She gathers it together into a long, soft brush, and slowly she wipes away the excess oil from Jesus' feet. She takes her time and when she is done, the aroma of the nard is everywhere in the room. Jesus' feet, one of the least-loved parts of the body, now glistens with precious oil and is abundantly perfumed. Mary's hair also glistens with the oil wiped away from Jesus' feet, and this aroma will follow her for weeks to come.

The smell of the nard is so powerful, it fills the room. It is a heady presence, impossible to ignore. The fragrance itself becomes another dinner companion. With every breath, they smell Mary's devotion and love, but they also smell future suffering and death. While the aroma is unspeakably beautiful, it is also bittersweet, as everyone in the room knows that nard is used to perfume the body in preparation for burial. This act is one of devotion and loving-kindness, but is also one that points to what is to come.

Love and death have joined them for supper, and it is too late to ask them to leave.

Without permission, the disciples also have been anointed with the fragrance of Love and Death. It clings to their clothing and hair; they take it into their bodies with every breath; they eat it with each bite of food; they feel it in the slick of the oil on the floor. Once unleashed, the fragrance seems to have a will and power of its own. Like the Holy Spirit, the fragrance cannot be contained, and wafts and drifts as it wishes. It permeates the walls and windows and doors of the house, and now escapes to anoint the village and the world beyond.

All through the next days of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, his teachings and healings at the Temple, and his last supper with his closest disciples, the fragrance of Love and Death lingered and became an abiding presence. When Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane, he could still smell it. The fragrance accompanied him during his arrest and trials – Pilate must have smelled it when he interrogated Jesus. As the soldiers drove the nails into Jesus' feet, they must have been surprised by the perfume. And when Mary of Bethany joined the other women at the cross, the fragrance from Mary's hair must have been carried on the wind and noticed by all the others present.

I invite you to breathe deeply right now. Can you smell it? Can you catch even the slightest whiff of the floral tones? Even now, the scent released on that day over two millennia ago is still

present, still moving. Caught by the drafts and movement of the Holy Spirit, the tendrils of perfume from the nard poured out that day live on. The fragrance of love and fidelity, and death and suffering wafts through creation still. But what had been the fragrance of Love and Death that preceded Jesus' crucifixion on Good Friday, then became the fragrance of Love and Everlasting Life at Jesus' resurrection on Easter Sunday.

Amen.