Sensory Overload

A Meditation on John 12: 1- 11

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church April 7, 2019

Every season has its own fragrance. Mother Nature dabs it on – just a spritz - before she heads out the door. This is the season for the aroma of fresh cut grass, the smell of rain in the air, and spring blooming jasmine. Soon the smells of summer’s heat will rise from the asphalt, rise from the earth. Fall and winter have their own, unique scents: the fragrances of family meals, the aroma of Christmas. I can remember arriving home for the holidays to the comforting smell of cinnamon and cloves simmering on the stove, intermingling with the wonderful fragrance of a cedar tree. That was the smell of love.

Jesus approached his friends’ home, the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, and was welcomed by the familiar smells of a meal’s preparations. Fresh cut herbs, roasting meat. This was a home he knew well, a home where he was loved well. He had broken bread around this table many times. Now, on this week leading up to his death, six days before the Passover feast, he joins his friends here again. When danger is near, when pain is looming, we need to be with those who provide comfort and shelter. Jesus is no different. Here he is, in the town of Bethany, with his favorite people: Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Surrounded by love.

Though this passage revolves around Mary & Jesus, we need to stop and celebrate all the gifts experienced in this story. We think of this story as Mary’s gift, but there are others here giving gifts: her siblings know how to give gifts, too. Martha and Lazarus have their gifts to offer to Jesus, and they are also precious.

Martha has poured her heart into the preparations; this is a meal to celebrate that her brother, Lazarus, who was dead, is alive! It is a meal to celebrate Jesus, who restored her family! Her hands smell of garlic and onions, and by the end of the evening, she will still have bowls to wash, and tomorrow’s needs to consider. Her gift may not be glamorous, but it is an extravagant gift, too. Sure, on another occasion, she complained to Jesus because her sister wasn’t willing to make the hummus, but I believe she came to understand their unique individual roles. Martha was the Diane McGee or Dana Crinigan of her community. She knew how to prepare quantities of food, and she could smile while doing it. Martha, lived out her love for her family, for Jesus and his friends, by offering them nourishment for their bodies. Let us not forget her behind the scenes, often taken for granted, gifts of sustenance. Simple gifts, generously given.

Lazarus brings a gift, too; it is his presence. He is supposed to be dead! This might have been a meal of remembrance instead of a meal of celebration. Lazarus had gotten sick, died and been placed in a tomb. It had been sealed with a stone. No one wanted to open it – even when Jesus commanded them to! No one wanted to move the stone because they feared and dreaded the smell of death. But death is not the story that Lazarus brings to this gathering. The story that Lazarus brings is the promise of resurrection…for Jesus. The people seated at this table do not even realize how much they need Lazarus among them now nor how tightly they will cling to his story in the days ahead. When they are left to wonder, “How could Jesus be taken from us?” it is this story they will need. When they are left, weeping, knowing his body is in a tomb, it is Lazarus’ face they will need to envision.

It will require a leap of faith. Even for Lazarus. Lazarus, who is still stunned by recent events. Can you imagine his life, after being set free from death, after being set free from the cloth bindings that had been wrapped so carefully around his body? As the meal is served, his guests pepper him with questions: “What do you remember?” “What were your first thoughts?” “Did you feel pain?” “Did you know who was calling to you from outside the tomb?” Can you imagine how exhausted Lazarus must have been? Reliving these events, when he hasn’t even had time to comprehend them himself? Trying to live into the mystery. Living with the question, “why me? I have done nothing to deserve rebirth.” Isn’t that our truth?

Those sitting closest to him can still detect the lingering scent of the oils and spices that were poured upon his body after death. The fragrance clings to his hair, to his beard. It is a smell that is both disturbing and comforting. Here is one who was given over to death, and yet, is among them. How is this even possible? But their deeper concern is that Jesus will not be there when the stones are rolled across their own tombs. The fear is that Jesus will soon be lost to them. They want Lazarus there, and they want him to leave. They have to live with the reality of his death and the mystery of his rebirth.

And as if this were not enough, Martha’s joyful and abundant feast (wouldn’t she have prepared both Lazarus’ and Jesus’ favorite dishes?) with all of its intermingling aromas and Lazarus with the wafting scent of both death and life, in walks Mary. In walks Mary with her gift: a jar of ointment. It is so precious that it would take a year’s wages to replace it. In walks Mary, who kneels down in gratitude, who kneels down in love, who kneels down and bathes Jesus’ tired feet. It is such a tender scene, that we feel we are intruding. She wipes his feet with her hair, mopping up the fragrance so that she can carry it with her.

In Mark and Matthew’s telling of this story, they can’t even go there. It is just too intimate a moment. They describe a woman pouring ointment on his *head,* reminiscent of the anointing of kings or priests or prophets. Luke and John tell a different story, but it seems unlikely they would have invented this scene. They are able to describe a woman, and John would say, Mary, offering not only an extravagant gift, but offering it in an extravagant way. There is dignity in pouring fragrant oil on someone’s head, but there is little dignity in kneeling at someone’s feet, in using your hair as a towel. And the story that Luke passes on is of a “sinful” woman, for surely a woman of respectability would not have done something so personal, so intimate for a man who was not her husband. It was a risky move, this foot washing by Mary.

In Matthew, Mark & John’s version of this story, the gift is seen as wasteful. Extravagant. Foolish. It is seen as a poor choice. “This nard could have been sold and the money given to the poor” say the disciples, say the onlookers, says Judas. Jesus’ response confuses us, “you will always have poor among you.” As if he were dismissing care for the poor? Which we know he would never do. His response confuses us, but his response does not confuse Mary. Jesus *is* poor. Jesus is *the* poor one in her midst. He has no home, no possessions, not even an extra cloak. And so she gives an extravagant gift to one who is in need.

Lazarus walking from the tomb was a moment as vital for Jesus as it was for Lazarus. It wasn’t that Jesus needed proof that resurrection was possible. He was a miracle worker, after all. But the human Jesus would need hope in order to endure death. He would need this image as he suffered the pain of crucifixion. He would need this promise. A multi-sensory image: the smells of the spices, the fleeting scent of death, the sound of Lazarus’ shuffling footsteps, the vision of an empty tomb.

Mary washing Jesus’ feet and drying them with her hair serves in a similar fashion. It is gift for giver and receiver. Mary did not know the power of this extravagant outpouring of love. She was mirroring what she had seen Jesus do time and time again. He healed abundantly, he multiplied abundantly, he calmed storms abundantly, he restored life abundantly. She only one way to respond because she had only witnessed one possible response: abundance!

At the end of this same week, when Jesus removes his tunic, wraps a towel around his waist and washes the disciples’ feet, he will be able to evoke the scent of the nard which Mary poured upon him. That powerful fragrance, that demonstration of love, will encourage him as he washes the feet of those who look on him with confusion and fear. That powerful fragrance will sustain him as he washes the feet of Peter, who will fail him. That lingering fragrance will empower him as he washes the feet of Judas, who, by that time, had sold his loyalty for a few coins. He will wash each pair of feet with the same love, the same care, without judgement or condemnation.

Mary gave Jesus a tangible reminder of love’s extravagance. A sacrificial love that isn’t just for the friends who stumbled along beside him as best they could, but also for those who would wound him body and soul. Mary did a risky thing, took the chance of making herself look foolish in front of family and friends. But maybe hers wasn’t the only risky love. For someone like me, cooking for others can be pretty stressful! And Lazarus? Because he was friends with Jesus, because he was raised from the dead, his name was added to a most wanted list.

Love makes us do foolish things. Love is a risk, and God asks us to be risk takers. God asks us to believe in the risky work of forgiveness and restoration. God asks us to believe in the extravagance of love which can bind up the broken hearted and see one another through the darkest of days. God asks us to risk loving the one in need who stands before us, to pour out extravagance upon them in hopes that it will see them through whatever lies ahead.

That is how Martha and Lazarus and Mary loved Jesus to the cross and beyond. That is how we are called to love in God’s name. All kinds of gifts from all kinds of people. Thanks be to God, the source of all good gifts. Amen and amen.

Sources consulted: Sanders, Beth, The Christian Century, March 2007; Tetzlaff, Chana, Modern Metanoia, February 2016;Allen, Amy Lindeman, Political Theology Network, April 2019; Hoezee, Scott, Center for Excellence in Preaching, March 2016; Lewis, Karoline, Working Preacher, March 2016