

“Poured Out” *(Communion Prayers)*

(6 of 9 in the Lenten series, “Prayer”)

John 12:1-8

The Rev. Emily Krause Corzine
Associate Minister

March 13, 2016

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 • Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

Prayer for Illumination: Loving God, the one who pours out life into our weary souls, fill us these words by the power of your Holy Spirit. As your word is proclaimed may we be filled with your love and new life this day. Amen.

Ready or not, Holy Week is coming. Next Sunday cheering crowds and a parade celebrate Jesus, and only days later the same people demand his death. Today is the Fifth Sunday in Lent; the calm before the storm. Today we shift our focus and head toward Jerusalem. On the way Jesus enjoys down time with three friends who feel like family.

Lazarus, Martha and Mary are siblings. They live in Bethany, a village outside of Jerusalem. The sisters have hosted Jesus and the disciples before. **Mary's contemplative nature and Martha's hospitality are known from other stories.** Their brother Lazarus isn't as well known, but he has his own memorable story. He is just on the other side of a uniquely hair-raising experience. **In the previous chapter he dies; that's right, dies.** He is so dead that his sisters grieve. So dead he stinks. Lazarus is so dead that Jesus stands in front of his tomb and weeps. After weeping he cries out with a loud voice and scares death away. Lazarus emerges from the tomb to live another day.

At dinner Lazarus enjoys large portions of everything. He's unwrapped from bandages, hungry after a four day fast. No one sits too close to him – he still looks and smells like death. That smell pervades the room. Martha serves dinner. Then Mary steps forward, holding a clay jar.

This week I did a little research on perfume. **The world's most expensive perfume is Clive Christian No. 1 Imperial Majesty.** Back in 2006 only 10 bottles of this super-rare, exclusive limited edition perfume were released for sale in Harrods in London and Bergdorf Goodman in New York. The perfume in its 16.9 ounce extraordinary Baccarat crystal bottle costs \$215,000. With a range of aromatic intrigue Clive Christian No. 1 turns heads with a mix of sandalwood, white peach and Jasmine or Cardamom, Cedar Woods and Orange.

Mary kneels without a word. Not beside her resuscitated, **smelly brother, but at Jesus' feet. Mary breaks the jar's neck.** The smell of nard fills the room. **It's a profound and complex aroma, which combines sweet/spicy/musky.** It's a very organic earthy scent. One might describe it as a smell that is bursting with life and with promise.

Lazarus' smell of death gives way to a sharp scent halfway between mint and ginseng. Then as everyone in the room watches, Mary does four remarkable things.

First, she loosens her hair in a room full of men, something an honorable woman doesn't do. Second, she pours perfume on Jesus' feet. Kings receive anointing on their heads, not their feet. Third, she touches him – a single woman rubbing a single man's feet – also not done, not even among friends. Fourth, she wipes the perfume off with her hair.¹

She uses her hair carefully, to wipe each foot. She slowly, gently wipes each and every toe with her hair. The scent fills the house. No one says a word.

All eyes watch Mary and Jesus. These moments between them are so personal, so intense. Disciples look away. The room is silent; the earthy scent warms the air. The heady, exquisite fragrance lingers not only on Jesus' feet but on all in the room. It affects everyone. The rich aroma fills the house.

It's too much for Judas. Mary's gone overboard. That perfume cost a year's salary. Couldn't the money have been used to help the poor? Scripture says he's a thief, but Judas has a point. In

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor's sermon "Prophet Mary," March 21, 2010.

fact, we know Judas is right. The money could have bought something that lasts, like housing, or food. Isn't a year's worth of good nutrition more valuable than enjoying a pleasant smell for an evening?

Judas is right. **Logic can't argue with him.** But on this day Mary lives in a different reality. **Her brother's death did to her** what death does to any of us. The sting of death shocks us into seeing the world differently. Judas is right, and two weeks ago Mary might have agreed with him. **But now her brother's** almost death has reshuffled her priorities. She was stunned by these events, Martha, too. Things that used to seem so important no longer were of importance. Right now, she is able to live in the moment. Sometimes what really matters is being present.

A friend of mine took her daughter to college out of state. For teens, going to college is an adventure, full of excitement. It can feel like new life; it is new life. But for parents, or to be specific, for mothers, it can feel otherwise. **Yes, it's a new** beginning, but it also is an ending.

So in those last days and hours before parting, my friend felt a strong temptation to make those hours count; to use them to impart her vast wisdom; how to get stains out of laundry, how

to stay safe at parties, how to find Costco and Target, how to, how to, how to.

But the reality is that it was too late for that. The reality is that what they had was precious time to be together, to be present with one another. Sometimes what really matters is being fully present.

Jean Vanier, a Canadian theologian and philosopher, suggests that ultimately, love isn't doing things for other people. Rather, love is being present with them, revealing to them their beauty; the light shining in them.²

I think that is what happens to Mary. She makes a choice to be in the moment with Jesus; to experience him as a wonder to treasure. She could have anointed his head, to proclaim him king. But she does not. **Mary's choice to anoint his feet makes the unspoken explicit.** When she drops to her knees and pours out the perfume it can only mean one thing. Jesus is going to die. Only dead people get their feet anointed with nard.

Mary acts out the truth before anyone else can see it. She is a prophet like all other prophets who have come before. She

² <http://www.christiancentury.org/reviews/2016-01/immanuel-agenda>

interrupts the dinner party to anoint her friend for burial, to share in his suffering, to grieve beside him. She offers her unspoken prayer. She embodied prayer for her friend. An act of devotion.

Judas protests loudly. **Jesus responds** “**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.**” (John 12:7-8).

Jesus so often puts the needs of the poor above his own. Yet here he says “**Leave her alone.** Leave me alone. Just this once, **let her look after me, because my time is running out.**” He speaks to Judas and also to any of us who feel wary around extravagant outpourings of faith or love or service. “**Leave her alone.**” As if to say we act like Judas when we know best how people should use their treasures, when we want to control how others respond to God.

What Judas critiques as waste is actually the greatest gift Mary can give; her focused presence. Mary acts like there is no tomorrow. When she pours out that perfume she is saying “**This is it.**” Somehow she knows time is short and when it comes to Jesus, it is time to pour out the very best.

Writer Annie Dillard offers this advice to her colleagues:

Spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later place... **give it, give it all; give it now.**"³

It is advice for writers and also advice for life. Discerning when and how we give it all is a question we have to ask each and every day.

We continue walking in this journey of Lent holding close to the practice of prayer, learning and growing in our own spiritual discipline. What do we learn from Mary, being full present to Jesus?

Next Sunday we enter Holy Week. We will step deeply into the story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Soon Jesus will gather his friends together for a final meal. He will tie a **towel around his waist, and wash his disciples' feet.** He will give them a new commandment: Love one another, as I have **loved you.**"

³ Annie Dillard, *Christian Century*, March 2, 2016, pg. 18.

At least one disciple will argue with him. Others will think he has lost his mind. **This washing, it's intimate, excessive.** While their feet are being washed a few will remember Mary, bending over Jesus' own feet.

Mary acted out his last, new commandment the week before he gave it. She seized the moment. Her loving action lingers in the air, like the perfume she poured out, teaching us how to be present with one another, always pointing to the One who pours out his life and forgiveness on the cross.⁴

Amen.

Copyright 2016, First Congregational Church, UCC

⁴ With deep gratitude to Rev. Ann Palmerton for the inspiration and collaboration on this sermon. I have borrowed ideas, with her permission.