

LENT 5 C SERMON for April 3, 2022 at Grace Lutheran
TEXT: John 12: 1-8 (Mary anoints Jesus)
TITLE: How Do You Say, 'I Love You'?

So there was a dinner party at Lazarus' house, to celebrate Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead. His sisters, Mary and Martha, were there, as well as Jesus and his disciples.

Verse 2 says, "They were at table," but they weren't sitting on chairs, as we do nowadays. The original Greek text says they "were reclining", because that was the common way meals were eaten in those days, in the Middle East. People lay around a low table, propped on their elbows, or just around a blanket with food on it. In this case, I'm sure they were reclining, and from above looked like spokes from the hub of a wheel, with their bodies extended outwards from a six-inch-high table and their feet at the outermost edge.

At some point in the meal, Mary comes up to Jesus' feet and anoints them with a whole pound of expensive perfume, and then wipes his feet with her hair.

Think about this: a young woman gets down on her knees and pours a huge amount of very expensive perfume on Jesus' bare feet in the middle of a dinner party, with all these important men around the dinner table. She then removes her head scarf, shakes her hair loose, bends over, and wipes off the oil with her hair. The fragrance must have filled the whole house. And surely that fragrance remained on Jesus' feet, and in Mary's hair, for days.

Think of the sheer physicality of it. Jesus' feet, maybe once beautiful, were more likely hardened and calloused from much walking. And in those days, women let their hair down only at home in private, but here she is letting it all hang down at a dinner party! And the pure essence of nard, a healing oil, was said to be reminiscent of the lost Garden of Eden.

This is sensuous stuff! Maybe that's why scholars and preachers usually

move very quickly to the theology or the symbolic meanings. But the most striking thing is the stunning extravagance of Mary's gesture: way over the top. A whole vial of this most costly perfume.

Makes you wonder: were Mary of Bethany and her two siblings rich? Or was this perhaps the nest egg of a family of modest means? Is Mary pouring out all their family savings on Jesus' feet? If so, there's no indication that her brother Lazarus and sister Martha said anything in protest.

The protest comes from Judas, the treasurer. "Imagine the thousands of dollars that could have been raised to help the poor, what it could do for the Mustard Seed Church, or Our Place downtown, or for Lutheran World Relief, or for orphans in Haiti, or folks in refugee camps!"

It's almost as if this story deliberately offends, not only by the sensuous extravagance, but especially by Jesus' commendation of Mary's action. Most of us would side with Judas on this one.

The most scandalous thing in the story, however, is Mary's unrestrained love and affection for Jesus. It's so over-the-top that it's embarrassing.

Yet this beautiful gesture sparkles and shimmers like a diamond. It harks back to the story of the raising of Lazarus in the 11th chapter of John's Gospel. It also anticipates Jesus' own washing of his disciples' feet. And it also prepares us for Jesus' death and burial, which Jesus knows is inevitable.

Mary's action also challenges us – challenges our usual sober restraint whenever we're grateful, or happy, or sad. There must have been some disciples at that dinner party who knew that Jesus was not long for this world, but evidently the prospect of his leaving affected Mary more deeply because she loved him more deeply.

In a way, she had fallen in love with him. It was a requited love, for all Jesus had done for her brother and the family. But mainly, I believe her love was a thanksgiving for all Jesus had done for her a person. Jesus treated her as an equal, as a human being of great worth and value, as a precious sister who was intelligent enough to be one of his students (remember the time she

sat at his feet and discussed theology while Martha was doing traditional “woman’s work”).

Almost no one treated women well in those days. They were often treated worse than second-class citizens (they weren’t even citizens, for that matter). As has happened often in history, women were good for only having children, satisfying men, and serving, and being a homemaker. Along comes Jesus, the future king of Israel and the greatest Rabbi and teacher of their time, and treats Mary as a person of great value, worth every bit as much as any man.

To me, this makes sense of what Mary did at that dinner party. The extravagant anointing, and wiping his feet with her hair, was a way for Mary to say, without words: “I love you, and I’m eternally grateful for all you’ve done for me.” I mean, how do you say “I love you”, to someone before he dies, to someone who has meant everything to you; to someone who has been your Saviour, your life-saver? Mary, perhaps spontaneously, chose this way to say, “I love you.”

Near the end of the movie “Titanic”, the main character, Rose, is 101 years old. After telling the salvage people about her lover who drowned, she says, (quote) “He saved me— saved me in every way a person can be saved.” That’s actually what God has done for us in Jesus Christ!

How do we say “I love you” to the incarnate God, the Messiah-Christ, the only one in the world who gave us absolutely pure and unconditional love? We Christians believe that this perfect Lover was the incarnation of our infinite Creator, humbling himself/herself to an unimaginable degree, becoming a finite, fellow human being on our planet, in our history, and even dying on a cross to save us. How do we say to this Saviour: “I love you”?

St. John loved to talk about love. His Gospel is full of the language of love and so are his letters. I think the best three-word poem ever written is in 1st John 4, verse 8: “God is love.” And the next verse after this, says, “We love, because God first loved us.”

God the Father created us, God the Son died for us, and God the Holy Spirit lives in within us and within God's creation, guiding and preserving and blessing us in countless ways. How do we say "I love you"?

A pastor in Ontario told a story of when she was in seminary: a particular teacher challenged her and invited her to dig deeply within herself and to excel. He motivated her, she said, and made her "soul feel like flying" (unquote).

This seminarian was looking forward to doing some specialized study with this particular professor in her final year, but before that year, he announced that he was leaving to take a position in a seminary in another country. She was grief-stricken, and there were no words (she said) that could express her gratitude toward him. She thought to herself, "What special gift can I give him, that's personal?"

Since she was very good at embroidery, she hand-embroidered a wall hanging, making a beautiful and favourite design, crying over the stitches while she was embroidering. And, finally she gave it to him as a farewell gift. She was never a social friend of his, or confidante, anything but his student. Therefore she felt she had no "right" to grieve so deeply. And she had no idea how the gift would be received. She just knew she had to give it - for her own sake, to satisfy her own need to say "thank you", and to express her sorrow over his leaving.

The professor kept that wall-hanging in his new office, prizing it highly. So also Jesus prized Mary's gift, and got angry when Judas disparaged it.

So...how do we say "I love You" to our Creator who has given us everything? How do we say "thank you" to God's beloved Son who laid down his life for us, atoning for all our sins and bringing us the gifts of forgiveness, new life and purpose, and even eternal salvation in heaven? How do we say, "I love you" to such a One?

Well, we don't have the opportunity to do something like Mary did, but we can express our thanks in art or music or good works or deeds of service; in caring for our environment, practising good stewardship of possessions

and being generous to people in need. There are many possible ways to say “I love you” to our Saviour.

In 1997 Diana the Princess of Wales died suddenly, and many Britons were surprised by the deep grief that they were feeling. The grief of the British people was irrational. Some even said they had no 'right' to feel such grief. But the TV cameras captured the sorrow and affection of the British people expressed by thousands bouquets of flowers left in front of Kensington Palace and in many other public places. One report said that there were over a million bouquets left at Kensington Palace alone!

No one organised it. And on the surface, it seemed completely useless. It was like Mary's gift – so pointless, yet so poignant. Think of the far more useful things that could have been done with all the money spent on all those flowers! The Royal family were at first reluctant to even acknowledge that beautiful gesture. But (as portrayed in the Helen Mirren film “The Queen”) they finally realized that this was people's way of saying, “I love you.”

Jesus received Mary's gift for what it really was. It didn't matter whether it was ridiculous or inappropriate. It was her gift, and he received it with a grace born of love.

Just so, our brother Jesus receives our gifts. The now-resurrected Christ welcomes whatever way we choose to say: “I love you.”

Amen.