

## **“Fragrances”**

**Sermon, Sunday April 3, 2022**

**Dear church,**

This is a fragrant story, full of the sweet scent of love. It has stirred the imagination of listeners and story tellers alike since it began its ascent in the first century. It appears in various versions in all four gospels. In some of the narratives, it's a woman of bad reputation who purchases the expensive nard and pours it over Jesus' feet. In other accounts the anointing takes place at the home of Simon the Leper, in yet another one at a Pharisee's house; this one occurs in the home of his good friend Lazarus. In the gospel of Mark, the woman pours the expensive oil over Christ's head; here and in Luke it is poured over his feet. In some accounts the anointing takes place two days before Passover, here it is six days before Passover. The intoxicating fragrances of this anointing oil, they must have overwhelmed the observers' nervous systems and impacted their memory. It is all a blur. “What is it now?” we want to ask.

For those who need to know which version of the story is the historically accurate one, these variances present a little problem. As for me, and I hope for you as well, it is just an indicator that the anointing of Jesus could have taken place in any of those environments. As far as the Holy Spirit is concerned, it could have taken place in your house, on your porch, in your living room. The question is: would you have spent the money? Would you have bought the perfume? If you are honest, the answer is: probably not. I mean, a year's wages, that's roughly a college education, right? So, you probably would have passed on that and taken the side of Judas Iscariot, as bad as that sounds. You would have said, “We are not rich people, let's be reasonable here...” And you would have pulled out some product from Body Works that you deemed good enough for wiping someone's feet. “Yes, this is Jesus... still, let's be reasonable here!”

But Mary or whichever woman committed this act of extravagant love, was not reasonable and she didn't care what other people thought. She knew that this expensive oil was actually cheap in comparison to the fragrance of Christ's sacrifice, the death he was about to die on the cross. And in this particular version of the story, Mary was also mindful of Jesus' role as the Passover

Lamb for humanity, an expression that John who recorded this version of the story was fond of. The expression shows up early in his gospel when the Baptist sees Jesus and exclaims, "See, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world!" In the Jewish tradition of the time, the lambs used for the Passover meal had to be inspected six days before the Festival. This anointing, we hear, took place exactly six days before Passover. You think Mary didn't time this? In her mind, a person who pours himself out, who sacrifices his life, deserves the very best. Even if other people think that's unreasonable. This was her choice to make, her money to spend and, like the other Mary's in the gospels, this Mary was a remarkably strong and determined woman.

What does this story mean to us? I have several ideas. One is a bit unorthodox. There are times, I believe, when God encourages us to tone down reason actually and embrace passion. I am not saying that we should abandon reason, but there may be times when we should give the impulse of loving extravagance an outlet and not always think about what's most reasonable. Just imagine if God were reasonable all the time! Would God have created this world with all of its problems and all of its imperfections and a human race that's bent on destroying it? I tell you, we wouldn't exist if God were reasonable! Noah's ark would have never been built if God were reasonable. Jesus wouldn't have died on that awful cross if God were reasonable! We exist because of love. God is love.

When we look through the gospels, we will find several instances of extravagance. Why did Jesus turn six huge stone jars of water into wine, each jar holding between 20 and 30 gallons? That was much more than needed, unless those wedding guests were really thirsty! Why did the Good Samaritan not only rescue the victim but pay for his care in advance, a stranger? Why did Zacchaeus pay back fourfold what he owed to people? The fragrance of the true gospel will lead people to act with unreasonable generosity at times.

What does this story mean to us? Here is another idea... We may look at the courage and strength of character displayed by Mary and the other women mentioned in these anointing stories. In each case, they risk being ridiculed or blamed for making a scene; they risk being rumored about,

and they don't care. How many of us are held back by the opinions of others? How many times are we tempted to not do something because of what people might say or what they may think about us? A truly free person will do what they believe is right even if it looks ridiculous in the eyes of some. Jesus really treasured the liberated women in his orbit. To be frank, they are often stronger and more mature in their faith than the twelve male disciples, from Peter to Judas Iscariot. We should have had a gospel according to Mary. I'd like to read the gospel according to Mary because these women were special! Let us inhale the fragrance of their faith, which filled the entire room and enabled Jesus to prepare for the ultimate sacrifice. And let us be as brave as Mary! Amen.

Have a most blessed weekend!

Pastor Andreas Wagner