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Date: 3 April 2022

Lesson: Deuteronomy 15:1-2, 7-11; John 12:1-8

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<sup>1</sup>Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup>There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. <sup>3</sup>Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. <sup>4</sup>But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup>"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" <sup>6</sup>(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) <sup>7</sup>Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup>You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

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It has been known for some time that the sense of smell is closely associated with our memories. In recent years, scientists have studied why this is the case, but humanity has known of this association since the dawn of time. The smell of a particular dish can place our minds back to a certain holiday or custom. The smell of a campfire smoke can be soothing for some people, but for others it could remind them of a harrowing experience. The church I was raised in was located a couple blocks away from the regional Sunbeam bakery. Often, when exiting the church, I would enter a world that smelled of freshly baked bread. When I pass by a bakery today, the smell still sends me back to my childhood church.

Although it is easy to miss, today's passage from John begs of us to recall smells and certain memories. The clue is who is present at this dinner. It was at the home of his friend Lazarus, Martha served the dinner, and their sister Mary was present as well. The presence of these three should remind us of what occurred a handful of verses ago in the previous chapter. Lazarus had died. Martha and Mary were weeping, as was Jesus. Where was there a smell in that story? Just before

Jesus had the tomb opened, he was warned about the stench. The smell of any corpse – especially if it has been four days – is something that cannot easily be forgotten. The smell lingers, both literally and in our memories.

Our narrator, John, wants the reader to remember that description when we move forward a handful of verses and we are now at a dinner in Lazarus' home. Mary takes a costly perfume made of pure nard and anoints Jesus' feet with it. When she does this, John tells us the fragrance fills the whole house. When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, the story records the crowd's response and how the act of raising Lazarus has placed Jesus in danger. But it doesn't record how the most important people responded to this experience. Until now, at this dinner scene. Lazarus likely has the greatest reason to show his appreciation, so he welcomes Jesus and his disciples into his home. Martha is once again preparing a meal for them all, showing her appreciation through this labor of love. Then there is Mary. She uncovers her hair, and uses it to anoint Jesus' feet. It is hard to describe how intimate and vulnerable this act of appreciation is. The custom of the culture was that a woman would only let down her hair and touch a man if they were married. So this is shocking to witness. However, most importantly, there is no protocol for how a person is supposed to show appreciation for the gift of resurrection. John uses the smell of a perfume that fills a whole house as a symbol for the amount of appreciation Mary has for her brother's resurrection. She aims to anoint the feet of the one she has witnessed bring life from death. It is such a beautiful scene.

Of course someone is bound to ruin it. "The money could be given to the poor!" Judas complains. It sounds like a reasonable criticism, but the motives behind the comment are what counts, and John says Judas' motives are rotten. Jesus' response alludes to our passage from Deuteronomy, that concludes with this instruction from God; "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'" Be generous. Open your hand. Allow your neighbor in need to have life. Dignify them for the child of God that they are. That whole passage from Deuteronomy is about giving people freedom so that they may experience life in a good way. "Remove the shackles of debt, so that people can celebrate life," God is saying.

When Jesus replies to Judas with, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me," it is not a comment that we should hear as permission to forget the poor. The opposite is

true, in fact. He is evoking this Deuteronomy passage as a reminder that all people should be able to celebrate life. In the case with Mary, this anointing with costly perfume her act of appreciation for the miracle of death becoming life. I'm sure Mary could not explain it all — I'm sure no one can — but that doesn't matter; she is caught up in appreciating the gift of life. Interestingly, she anointed his feet. Kings were coronated with oil that was poured over their head. However, when someone died, it was their feet that were anointed. We don't really know why Mary chose his feet. Jesus says it will prepare him for his burial, but we don't know if Mary consciously thought that. What we do know about Mary is that in this moment she was celebrating life even while death — her brother's and Jesus' — was close by. Even though that reminder of death was present, she still needed to celebrate life.

That makes me think of the season of Lent. It is a season that we allow ourselves to reflect more deeply upon our own mortality, and doing so should lead us to a better appreciation of the life we have. As the youth assist in leading our worship today, the adults among us probably think back to not-so-long-ago when we were that age. So Lent, Youth Sunday, and today's gospel lesson leaves me with is this: like Mary, let us give appreciation to God for the gift of life we have. There are reminders all around us about how quickly time passes, and that one day we will even take our last breath.

But will we be like Mary, Martha, and Lazarus and find a way now to show our appreciation for the gift? Will we come together and sing a song to God? Will we take a deep breath, reflect upon the people who are in our lives, and then we quietly exhale a “thank you” to the one who gives us life? Will we do what we can with the life we have left in us to leave this world a better place for these children and youth? Of course there will be people like Judas, who will find reasons to belittle displays of appreciation. My pastoral advice is to try your best to not be like that, and try not to let voices like that get you down. Instead, give thanks, like Mary, Martha, Lazarus did. Show hospitality. Cook something that smells amazing. Spend some time with your Lord. Whatever it might be, give thanks in your own way. Give thanks to God for this gift of life. Reminders of death will still appear, unfortunately. However, trust that somehow wrapped up in Jesus even death becomes new life. Amen.