

The Real Cost

John 12:1-8

The Fifth Sunday in Lent\ Year C

March 21, 2010

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O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Amen.

If you think about it, life is full of movement. Take an average day for example. The hands of the alarm clock move to the appointed hour only to squawk like a deranged parrot in our ears. In response, we move ourselves out of bed, bright eyed and bushy tailed as the saying goes, to be about our daily business whether it be school, work or whatever else we can come up with. Living our lives involves movement in and of itself - to the door, to the car, to the office, to the classroom, to coffee with a friend, back home, pick up the children. All the while, the world never ceases to move about us and with us. Day turns to night, night turns to day. And our lives keep rolling along. We are like feathers caught in a storm, tossed about, moving feverishly and sometimes aimlessly. In the course of all this, our lives brush up against up each other- the smile to a passerby, the nod, the wave, those brief moments of fleeting if superficial contact. At other times our lives collide with one another- whether its a gentle bump which sends us tumbling into a pile of laughter or a jarring crash which leaves wounds not easily healed. No matter how hard we try, none of us can stand still in life. We have to move backward and forward, not only in our great decisions, but in our simple acts of ordinary living. And sometimes those simple acts of living can lead to missed opportunities, incredible blessings and even revelation.

Winding his way through hills of Judea, Jesus enters the small village of Bethany. At first glance, Bethany is not a terribly interesting place. It is your typical small-town where everyone knows everyone else. Where not a day goes by without some contact between you and your neighbor. Nestled on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives, just two miles from Jerusalem, Bethany has the strange honor of serving as a suburb, as a place on the fringe of the capital. She is the last town before one reaches the great city walls and it is to those walls that Jesus is headed for the last time. But before he enters Jerusalem, he will stop and rest in Bethany. He will visit his old and dear friend Lazarus and Lazarus' sisters Mary and Martha. Now this isn't the first time Jesus has been to Bethany. John's gospel records one other auspicious visit. A visit which occurred when Lazarus had fallen ill and Jesus was late in coming to heal his friend though right on time for his funeral. You remember: Martha and Mary had written Jesus "Lord, the one you love is sick" and Jesus crossed the Jordan and made a bee line for Bethany knowing full well it was too late. Jesus arrived in the midst of the town's mourning and started to cry himself right there at Lazarus tomb. Leaving us and the crowds without a doubt as to his feelings for Lazarus. "See how he loved him" the people said. You know, love is a funny and amazing thing. No where does John ever tells us "why" Jesus loved Lazarus. But then maybe there is never a "why" to love when we get right down to it. Nevertheless, in Christ's tears, he shows us his full humanity while in the very next instant we are shown his full divinity as he shouts Lazarus back to life. Jesus created quite a scene in Bethany that day. Today, however, his visit to the village is not

nearly so dramatic.

Of all the so-called “inappropriate” things that Jesus did, there was none which so riled the chief priests as when Jesus raised Lazarus. It was bad enough that Jesus spoke with Samaritan women and healed the blind and the lame on the Sabbath, but the reviving of corpses was an entirely different matter. The raising of Lazarus had raised our Lord’s name up to number one on the Jerusalem establishment’s most wanted list. The priests are now in hot pursuit and Jesus knows his days are numbered. Lazarus and family can see it written on his face. So they take him in and care for him. If there is anyone who has a prayer of understanding all this, it is this family.

So for the night, they shut the world away behind the closed door of this tiny house. As the day’s glaring sunlight retreats back under the door, the oil lamps are lit casting their soft glow throughout the house. They flicker and give birth to playful shadows which seem to jump along the walls and sparse furniture. The air outside grows chilly as the heat of the day escapes into the clear night sky. The house, on the other hand remains warm as much from the conversation of people who love each other, as from the stove which is baking dinner.

The house is a picture of domestic life. Martha takes the lead gently stirring the soup and cutting vegetables. Checking occasionally on the bread baking in the oven. Lazarus tries to help her, but he remains a little unsteady from those days in the tomb. After all, being given new life is not something you every quite get over. Lazarus stares at every item he picks up as if it is the most beautiful thing in the world. The attempts of his once death-shrouded arms to cut bits of meat are clumsy. He is better off at the table with Jesus, simply sharing his space and company. He listens to what Jesus has to say and talking to him perhaps about those four days in the dark. While Martha is serving and Lazarus is sharing, Mary slips off to her room at the back of the house. The family is used to this. Mary is her own person, the dreamer whose eyes seem to occasional glaze over- seeing something only she can see. They know at those times, it is best to leave her alone. To let her do what she is going to do. Mary and her moodiness can always be worked around.

Martha finishes putting dinner on the table and takes her seat, pouring the wine into the earthenware goblets. Her brother, Lazarus sidles over to sit next to Jesus. The disciples begin to load up their plates. Judas’ money purse clanging at his side. They talk about their hopes and their fears. Lazarus remains completely unaware that he is the cause of Jesus’ present concern. Weeks earlier, when Jesus arrived in Bethany to save his friend from the tomb, he had signed his own death warrant. A strange trade had occurred and Lazarus is not even aware of it.

About this time, Mary returns. Hardly no one notices her or the clay jar which she holds in her hand. Then all of sudden, she kneels at Jesus feet, planting her knees in the dust. She breaks open the jar and the unmistakable odor of nard begins to permeate the room. A sharp, pungent odor somewhere between mint and ginseng. Everyone stops in mid-bite and turns their attention upon her. To the shock of everyone except Jesus,

Mary loosens her hair. Martha sits with her mouth wide open, too stunned to even muster an apology for her sister. You see, only prostitutes loosened their hair in a room full of men. Respectable women did no such thing. To Martha and to the others, Mary looks like a woman who has lost her mind. She pours the oil upon Jesus feet, watching as its fragrant droplets glide between his toes. The disciples look on with perplexed expressions except for Judas who is beginning to appear slightly agitated. Mary's behavior is peculiar to say the least- loosening her hair, pouring oil upon the feet rather than on the head as was custom. And she's not done yet. With her hands she touches Jesus feet, something which one does not do to another man when you yourself are a single woman. And certainly not to a rabbi. When she is done rubbing the oil into his skin, she takes her loosened hair and places it against his feet, her thick dark tresses wiping up both the dirt and remaining droplets. Jesus looks at her with love in his eyes. The disciples, Martha and Lazarus look at her as well, finding all of this too remarkable for words. Judas also watches her. Just looking at him you can tell he's just about to burst at the seams. Which, of course, he finally does.

"What wasn't this oil sold and the money given to the poor?" Judas complains. Judas complaint is legitimate, even though his motives, as far as John's gospel is concerned, are less than admirable. A working man, his wife and their children could live for a year on the money which, in Judas eyes, has been poured down the drain or rather on Jesus feet. Mary's actions are excessive. She is like someone who bought a bottle of twelfth-century champagne for a million dollars and then has the audacity to serve it for supper rather than admire it in her wine cellar.

"Leave her alone" Jesus says. "She's anticipating and honoring the day of my burial. You'll always have the poor with you. You won't always have me." What an odd thing to say? More odd than anything Mary has done. Jesus, who always threw his lot in with the poor, seems to be pulling rank. And more than that, he's become rather morbid with his talk of death. But, then again, maybe he has too. Maybe it takes him spelling it out for us, in order for the true significance of what Mary is doing to dawn in our hearts. He spells it out so we can realize that the moody and by now seemingly mad Mary has not gone off the deep end at all. Her ministry at Jesus feet is prophetic as it points to the heart breaking realization that Jesus' time is running out much like the oil poured from Mary's bottle. Her ministry tells us that Death waits around the corner, they can smell it, it hangs in the air like costly perfume. Of all those in the room, One wonders if Lazarus wasn't the first one, after Mary, to understand. Surely, he recognized the smell, the pungent nard in which his own burial clothes had been soaked before his entombment, the same smell which greeted him when he awoke in the tomb's darkness.

You know there was a moment in this story when it could have gone either way. Had Mary simply poured the oil on her hands and touched Jesus head, touched him like the prophet Samuel had touched King David of old, those gathered could have declared him royalty- royalty in the earthly sense with armies and court ministers. Judas would have liked that. Instead she touches Jesus' feet, embraces them. You see, only the feet of a dead man are anointed. "Leave her alone" Let her be about her task. She is a

priest who prepares a sacrifice. She anoints Jesus and in so doing, she names him, reveals him as the Passover Lamb. Not only as her Passover Lamb, or their Passover Lamb, but as our Passover Lamb. The Passover Lamb who will die not only for the Marthas who have served him long and hard, but also for the newcomers who like Lazarus are still trying to find their feet in living a new life. He will die not only for the faithful followers, but for the traitors in our midst and those who suck his church dry. My friends, what is clear is that there is plenty of time in the days to come in which to care for the poor- a lifetime in fact. But today, in Bethany, we are called to see and to worship the one who will ultimately make the poor, rich. Who will heal the broken hearted. Who will wear Lazarus death shroud, so that no one will have to wear it again. Who like a bottle of expensive perfume, will lavishly pour out his own blood and his love upon a cross. He will pour it all out. And none of it will be wasted. I don't think even Judas can argue with that.