

## ***The Fragrance of the Courageous Deed***

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

April 7, 2019

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

Midrash is a wonderful, creative Jewish tradition of Rabbinical commentaries on the Hebrew Bible, commentaries that attached to the Scriptures themselves. Midrash Rabbah said of a passage in Ecclesiastes: "The fragrance of a good perfume spreads from the bedroom to the dining room; so does a good name spread from one end of the world to the other."

Renowned Scholar on the Gospel of John, Raymond Brown, said that in Mary's anointing of Jesus, John might be symbolically saying that the "fragrance" of *her* good deed would spread throughout the world.<sup>1</sup>

John's Gospel is the only one of the four Gospels to name the woman who anointed Jesus' feet. Perhaps it was a reckless deed, it certainly was extravagant. But with the perspective of 2,000 years of human history since, it has become a powerful statement about generosity and courage.

Doesn't it also connect us with our senses? *Spikenard* comes from a flowering plant in the Himalayas, and was used as an incense at the altar in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Temples in Jerusalem, the centre of holiness for the Israelites of ancient times. That nard would have filled the room with its scent. But the passage is also very much about touch. To be clear, a woman of that time should not touch a man's feet. This healing touch of Mary's was a priceless gift to Jesus for whom death is awaiting him in the Gospel of John.

Jesus, the servant-king, will be making his royal entrance into Jerusalem through one gate in the very same chapter as this story of Mary anointing him. While the Jesus' enters Jerusalem greeted by palms the Emperor, following a very different kind of kingship model, will enter Jerusalem by another gate.

Death looms large in that room with Mary and Jesus, the storyteller John tells us, because the religious leaders – John calls them "the Jews" but these aren't everyday Jews – they are the Jewish religious elite, they are annoyed that Jesus raised Mary's brother Lazarus from the dead and growing numbers of people are following Jesus because of it. There is conspiracy happening, to kill Lazarus.

This space oozes with the odour of death and power, but a power transformed by Mary's bold act. The fragrance of a courageous deed will make an impact.

Perhaps I sound like a broken record as I say that the Bible repeatedly proclaims that God chooses those we would least expect to make the largest impact. People who step into highly charged moments and fill the space with the fragrance of their courageous deeds.

---

<sup>1</sup> Deirdre J. Good *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide. "Exegetical Perspective"*

*Who do you think about when we talk about those people, who transform spaces and systems oozing with privilege and injustice with their words or actions? Like a fragrance filling a space with its scent.*

To some outside that house looking in, those living in the fringes, Mary's acts would have been inspirational. To Judas, and other men with authority, Mary endangered a delicate balance of power. She broke countless cultural rules and expectations.

A story is told about Alberta Billy a member of the Laichwiltach We Wai kai Nation came to speak to the United Church of Canada General Council Executive meeting in 1981. Billy had been a lifelong member of the United Church, attended General Council Executive meeting to represent indigenous church members. So she said, matter-of-factly:

*The United Church owes the Native peoples of Canada an apology for what you did to them in residential school.*

It was Billy's own idea to ask for the apology. Another person present at that meeting recalled the looks on the faces of those gathered, "Their mouths dropped, but it needed to be said."<sup>2</sup>

Place yourself in those rooms

- in the presence of Jesus, remember that Martha was doing the important work also, hospitality, but imagine the feeling in that room as Mary anointed.
- Imagine the room filled with the most authoritative Representatives of the United Church of Canada Being told by Alberta Billy that it was time to apologize!

Can you imagine the edge in the air?

Many agendas of men in that room, people not impressed to see a woman, who feel she doesn't belong...Mary follows her heart. Bible scholars tell us that **that** is at the heart of Mary's power: *that she followed her heart in her action*. The eyes of the Pharisees looking into that room from outside. Eyes of fear and judgment. Still she finished the courageous deed she said out to do.

*Where have you found yourself in a similar scenario? Where you shared an unpopular viewpoint at a Church Council meeting. Or watched a political leader putting forward a vision that is not popular even to your constituents, but it is the *right* thing to do; balancing a budget, voting to investing in a project that needs to get done. Or maybe you posted something on social media that was from your heart, yet, as you type it out, you feel in the pit of your stomach that you are going to get some nasty comments.*

On this 5<sup>th</sup> week of Lent, as we near Holy Week, we follow Jesus to his palm parade of joy into Jerusalem, then, to the Last Supper we remember on Maundy Thursday, and watch him crucified, on Good Friday.

---

<sup>2</sup> From "Indian Country Today", by Martha Troian, August 16, 2011. Found at <https://newsmaven.io/indiancountrytoday/archive/25-years-later-the-united-church-of-canada-s-apology-to-aboriginal-peoples-A3-5m0AmGkKwie6ZS8cCjw/>

*I invite you this week to reflect on defining, conflictual moments, in your life and where were you in the midst of that conflict. Did you not do or say enough? That's ok, No guilt, no shame. Just note it and share it with your Creator in prayer. Did you act in courageous ways? Put pride aside, but offer it prayerfully to your Creator.*

These Bible stories are invitations to find ourselves in the characters – at different times we might relate to different characters in the stories. Sometimes we acknowledge that we do have some authority and regret our lack of involvement in a situation. Sometimes we didn't feel we had authority and so we didn't act, or perhaps we stepped forward in risky ways.

The Good News in all of this does not hinge on you or I! It hinges on the recurring, revolutionary pattern of our God. Our Bible stories make the ludicrous claim that God regularly puts weak, foolish, ill-equipped people – like you and me – into seemingly impossible circumstances. The Creator of the Universe changes the world regularly using regular people, often people who don't even suspect that they are on a mission! The fragrance of their, of our, courage and faith is a powerful thing indeed. Amen.