

Values – Sparrows and You

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
April 4, 2022
by Rev. Dave Le Grand

There is something about a good story being told: The ability of the story to pull you in, feeling the feelings, hearing the sounds, smelling the smells. The writer of John's Gospel has that ability, here, with very few words.

Just mentioning the expensive perfume; you know that it filled that room. Like, when I was in my university days, some people wore colognes with powerful scents, you knew what expensive smelled like – I won't mention the brand – but you knew what it was they were wearing across the room. How did Mary find the money for her perfume?

Some of us may not have caught the allegation that Judas was the treasurer among the disciples and a thief, according to John's Gospel. Was he really? Or perhaps, John, the master storyteller, is setting up a contrast: Mary, a woman who broke all the rules, took a huge risk, having the audacity to touch a man publicly and lavish him with perfume. In contrast, Judas, having a coronary, and calling the gesture wasteful. John has very little sympathy for Judas, but I love him. Could you love Judas? Jesus calls us to love everyone, that includes Judas.

Mary offers this gesture right on the heels witnessing Jesus raising her brother, Lazarus, from death. John, again the consummate storyteller sets the scene; the suspense, the pathos of the moment as Mary and Martha cry, and provoking Jesus to weep. Then, Jesus calls out for Lazarus to come out. I bet not just a few onlookers hadn't seen that one coming!

Nor would listeners have anticipated Mary's anointing of Jesus; Mary and Martha, profoundly grateful to Jesus for bringing their brother to life again. Picture Martha working away in the kitchen, doing host things for her dear friend. Mary is at Jesus' feet, completely oblivious to the men, casting daggers at her with their scowls. Look at this piece of artwork¹, the men looking dumbfounded.



Mary, she is laser focused on Jesus, caring for him. The smelly perfume, perhaps Mary purchased it originally to take away the stench of death brought home by her brother Lazarus who was dead, now alive thanks to Jesus. Death has a smell in the Gospel of John, and everyone knows that soon Jesus will be betrayed and executed by the religious elite, and Rome.

God's love looks like this, SMELLS like this – according to John. God doesn't care about opinions, or what the powerful think. God loves the powerful too, even as they judge. God even loves Vladimir Putin. Could you believe that? I do, but it isn't easy to,

¹ See Art Ballum church. Painting at the high altar - Anointing of Jesus

given the horrific acts Russia is carrying out. But God's love for us is absolute, unconditional, no limits. So much so, that into the corruption, and violence and hatred, "God becomes enfleshed and moves into the neighbourhood." That is The Message translation of the opening chapter of John.



It is a dangerous neighbourhood to move into. Look at the Motley Crew in this artwork,² notice how distinctive Judas is in the upper corner with his peaked hat, and money box in hand. God doesn't care, God loves all of them. The neighbours are pretty judgmental. God doesn't care. Beautiful and heroic people, like Mary and Martha, they are not at all appreciated by onlookers, they are even resented. God doesn't care about the onlooker. God's love is greater than the prejudice and hatred.

God's love filled that room that day with the smell of fine perfume. Just like God's love came to the rescue at the wedding, the first miracle of Jesus in John's Gospel. The wine jugs were empty, mom tells Jesus, it's time. Jesus, a bit resistant to the idea at first, creates the finest wine, and barrels of it, from water. God's love for every creature, from tiny sparrows to whales. How can we quantify that love?

Bible Scholar Karoline Lewis broke it down helpfully:

...[the] perfume costs 300 denarii - almost a year's salary. One denarii was a day's wage. In today's currency that \$8/hour, 8 hours/day, for 300 days is \$19,200. So, we're talking \$20,000 worth of precious perfume poured out on Jesus' feet.³

In other words, God's love flowing through Mary that day is limitless.

Just like the loving gesture of God enfleshed, Jesus, soon to experience horrors I cannot imagine, Jesus just loves. Poor Judas didn't get it. Many people with privilege don't. Scandalously extravagant gestures made in love.

I listened to a story on CBC's *The Current*, a young man, a Canadian, who met a Ukrainian friend at college in Canada;⁴ who, when Russia invaded, went home to Ukraine. His young sister was lost among the masses of evacuees, the brother was to join the fight, but he needed someone to find his sister. He posted on social media, asking for help, someone to find his sister so he could join the army. This young Canadian responded, dropping everything, to travel into a war zone. He had never travelled, and here he was Poland-Ukraine border, not really sure how he would find the girl.

² Mary of Bethany and Jesus Poland wood carving note Judas in three peaked cap and money box in hand

³ Rev Dr. Karoline Lewis commentary, April 7, 2019. Day1.org. <https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf20042e4/karoline-lewis-grace-upon-grace-love>

⁴ To hear that episode of "The Current" with Matt Galloway: <https://www.cbc.ca/listen/live-radio/1-63/clip/15899776>

God's love is like that. It makes no sense. It doesn't calculate the cost or consequence. Do we know how much God loves us? How do others know that we knew by our words and actions? God's love is limitless. Imagine if every one of us in this community, this world, truly grasped that love. What would our world look like, sound like, smell like?

We can't do much about the world, but we can pray for it, and pray and act in solidarity with those who suffer. And we can start today to live more gratefully. Compassion for the "Judases" of the world. God loves them. Also, appreciating the "Marys" and "Marthas" the world might otherwise ignore; let us notice those everyday gestures of care, and let people know that we notice.