

Gospel John 12:1-8 (NRSV) ¹Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ²There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³Mary 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. ⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" ⁶(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.) ⁷Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

I have walked upon a mountain lake in the calm after a rain. There is no space between the forest floor and the glassy cold water, no bank. The reservoir is full.

I have sat in a seat that someone has sat in before and their perfume lingers. With just that little bit of scent, the memory of the person fills my mind.

I have entered the kitchen on Thanksgiving morning and the yeasty smell of hot rolls baking in the oven after the turkey is finished cooking fills the room. I could eat the air.

I have stepped into a room that has a bowl of fresh cut gardenias sitting on a table. A gardenia's sweetness is thick. I can taste it. It only takes one small gardenia blossom to fill a room. A whole bowl of gardenias can affect more than your nose. You can feel a little queasy sometimes.

Mary, sister of Lazarus, the friend who Jesus had raised from the dead, anointed Jesus' feet with a costly oil that was used to prepare a body for burial. I imagine a pound of nard is pungent like a bowl of gardenias. The air in John's text is filled with sweetness.

The season of celebration is near. The gang is all there – Mary and Martha, Lazarus, the disciples, Judas is named, and Jesus. There is more fullness in this text than the air. The Greek word that John uses for “was filled” is *eploerothe*. It is the root of our word “plethora.” *Eploerothe* means more than a multitude of items or a fullness of volume. It can also mean “complete.”

The gospel of Matthew uses this word *eploerothe* when the fishing nets become filled with fish. He also uses it when he refers to a prophecy being fulfilled. Jesus was for Matthew the fulfillment of the Hebrew prophets.

I think John is indicating something similar here in his own symbolic way. John is the master of symbols and nuanced phrases. I believe the reference here to the fragrance of the nard, a burial ointment, and the fullness of the air refers to the fulfillment of the prophecies of old. It signifies that in Jesus there is a completion. And, at this point in the text, the moment of completion is well on the way.

To solidify this idea are these two men, Lazarus and Judas, Lazarus who Jesus raised from the dead and Judas who was to betray Jesus, both here together in the room with Jesus. And, there is Mary whose extravagant gift to Jesus reminds us of God's gift of life to us. The extravagance of God or the depletion of sin, life or death, are hanging in the air with the perfume.

Here in this passage, time itself is *full to the brim*. The age is coming to a close. Mary is pouring out the things left for the dead onto the living. Jesus heading toward his death on a cross is bringing in a new way of life. His response to Judas exclaims this extravagance. "Leave her alone. You will not always have me." Love in this new age is expressed with devotion and joy not duty. Extravagance not depletion. Jesus shows Judas the way to fullness as he alludes to the cross. Judas did not understand. In John both meanings of the word *Eploerothe* are present as the scent of nard filled in the air: fullness and completion.

I have to make an aside. I think it is important to realize that John's portraits of Mary and Judas have been exaggerated through the centuries and idealized by Christians. Women have over emphasized Mary's humility and self-sacrifice to give us a picture of a meek and mild doormat sitting at Jesus' feet. This is a wrong picture of Mary who is really a woman of great strength and an advocate of justice. This portrait that John paints of her in this text shows real intentionality on her part for her generosity. And the church has demonized Judas as the sole betrayer of Jesus. People with mental illness have been condemned in part through history because of the demonization of Judas and a lack of understanding

about depression, and other biological factors relating to mental disease. Guilt and despair are debilitating. One can imagine the disciples' anger at Judas for initiating the process. And is often the case in families that have a lot of hurt one person is blamed for it, and feels the guilt far worse than should be. I remember in the movie Ordinary People the older brother died in a boating accident and the younger brother bore the guilt of that from his parents. As the movie progressed we saw that the unhappiness of the family was present even before the older brother's accident. Both boys became victims of despair. Guilt and despair can affect our bodies and our families. It is unfortunate that Judas became the sole depository of all blame over the centuries and this shouldn't be. Judas had enormous guilt and sadness for what he did. I think it is a shame the gospel of John doesn't show him more compassion for his despair because, like I said, we know from the gospel account that everyone betrayed Jesus in the end. Everyone bore responsibility for Jesus' death not only Judas. And, in Christ, they were all redeemed.

Having said that, certain characteristics of Judas in the gospel of John still have to be reckoned with. We can highlight the portrait of Judas in John not to demonize Judas but to illustrate our own humanity. In Mary and Judas we have the proverbial glass, which is either half full or half empty. Judas' glass was half empty and was drained dry. Mary's glass was half full and became overflowing. We, like these examples, can orient our life self-centeredly, the glass half empty or in a grateful and loving way, the glass half full. To live a life of feasting on love and gratitude is to transform the world. It is as if our souls are stretched wide enough that all wars and conflicts have space enough to cool off, heal and be

forgiven. Living in God's grace, it is as if our hearts are expanded to reach out to draw others into love. Seeds of tears, which may have been sown along life's way, are nurtured into blooms of joy. To live a life oriented to ourselves is to implode. Our world gets smaller and smaller and smaller until we cannot even love ourselves. In contrast, the heavenly banquet, the communion of saints, the fellowship of the body, the forgiveness of sins, are all ways to describe what happens when the human response to God's love is intimate and astonishing, grateful and loving.

Today John invites us to enter into this Easter story and participate in the fullness of the death and resurrection of Christ. If I were an early Christian, I would be in the final days of Lenten fasting. I would have read the sacred texts, made the sacred promises, and readied myself for the drowning of my old life and a rising into a life committed to living as Christ lived. After midnight on Easter morning I and the crowd of communicants would be taken to the sacred place where baptisms happen. The early Christian rituals were somber and serious. They were life changing. I can imagine the communicant stepping into the pool, sides overflowing as body displaced water. Water is poured out like this holy nard. God saving activity is elevated and adored. The holy words are said,

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and earth;
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son Our Lord,
Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended into Hell; the third day He rose again from the dead;

He ascended into Heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God, the Father almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and life everlasting.

My rituals in the Lenten season of 2022 are not so dramatic. I'm just trying to focus on keeping the glass half full each day! Nevertheless, I am reminded that on this 5th Sunday in Lent, we are in the fullness of time. What about you? The scent hanging in the air as we approach Easter is not death but life everlasting. Our cup runneth over...let us remember and be filled.