

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

John 12:1-8

Isaiah 43:16-21

Psalm 126

Philippians 3:4b-14

April 3, 2022

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

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Today is a story about family. The family we are given and the family that we choose. And, it's about how we take care of each other and when we don't. It's a story about Jesus' family...the family he chose...Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. And, it's about his extended family...the people he healed. The people he talked to and prayed for. The people he celebrated with and stood up for.

But Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were Jesus' close friends...the friends that were so close to Jesus they were like family. They loved each other, spent time together, laughed together and when Lazarus died, we are told that Jesus wept. And, I want to suggest that the story of these four individuals is a powerful example of what our Lenten journey with one another can and should look like.

So I want to start this morning not with our text from John 12 (although we will get there) but with a quick look back to earlier chapters in John. I want us to build a little context before we get to Mary's extravagant display of love for her dear friend, Jesus. And...I want us to think about a central theme running throughout this narrative. I want us to consider the theme of regret. Regret experienced and regret released. Regret confessed and regret redeemed.

Let's start with Jesus...by the time we get to our Gospel text today, Jesus has been traveling around Galilee, turning water into wine, hanging out with a Samaritan woman at the well, feeding five thousand, walking on water, defending the woman caught in adultery, healing a blind man...he is busy to say the least.

And then, in the midst of his ministry, his beloved friend Lazarus dies. Now when Jesus heard that Lazarus was ill, he hesitated to go to him. He thought Lazarus was just sick, nothing to be too concerned about. Jesus seemed so caught up in his own work (important as it was) that he didn't take a break to immediately go to Lazarus. In fact, Jesus waited 2 days to go to Lazarus and by the time he got there, Lazarus had already died.

Take a moment to think about how Jesus felt. I imagine Jesus full of regret. Why didn't I go sooner? There were so many things I wanted to say. Maybe I could have done something to help. Did he even know how much he meant to me?

The moment gets worse when Martha accuses Jesus for delaying...Lord, if you had only been here. If only you had been here things would have been different. You can picture the tears running down her face. These dear ones torn in two by regret. It's a painful moment to witness.

Let's stop here for a moment. Sit with this image. Of Martha and Jesus.

How many of you have gone through something similar? Maybe you haven't said the important things you needed to say to someone you love. Maybe you let an argument fester until you thought the divide could never be repaired. Maybe you didn't help a friend at their time of deep need because you were busy. In those moments, did you feel regret? Do you still feel regret?

Jesus did. In fact, he was so overcome with regret and grief that he wept. And, then suddenly, he called out to those around him...Unbind him and let him go! Let Lazarus go for he is no longer dead! Lucky for Jesus he could create miracles.

If only we could all have opportunities to make amends for the moments we have missed, for the people we have let down, for the things we should have done, but didn't. If only, we could roll back the clock and bring back to life the "if only" moments of our past. If only I had gone to visit my friend before he died. If only I had apologized for the words I said. If only I had told my family how much I appreciate them. If only I had said I love you more often. If only...

Jesus got to change his "if only" moment. Do you ever hear this story and wish you could do the same? We all wish we had Jesus' miraculous power to fix what we regret. And...maybe we do.

Take a look at John chapter 12, today's Gospel. Jesus returns to Bethany to his friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Lazarus whom he had raised from the dead. Martha who readies the home for Jesus' visit. And, Mary who stands there full of gratitude, full of love, full of emotion overflowing for her friend. This is a scene where love has returned...where regret has been redeemed. Where Mary shows us what it means to live full of abundant grace. You can feel it as you read the words from John.

I want you to notice what Mary does with the opportunity. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

Mary is so overcome with joy, so full of gratitude for Jesus that she responds in a gesture of incredible abundance, without any hesitation. There are no excuses. No "maybe later's". She simply pours this expensive perfume on Jesus' feet and the room fills with a beautiful fragrance.

Not only does she lavish Jesus with such an extravagant gift but she lets down her hair and wipes his feet...something that would never have been done by a respectable woman in those days. But Mary doesn't care about other people's expectations or opinions. She doesn't care about what others say she should do or shouldn't do. She simply shows love. She lives without regret. And, she set aside any hesitation that may have lingered from her brother's death. She even stands up to Judas' ridicule and judgement.

Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?

Can you imagine her regret if she had listened to Judas? What if she had carried Martha's condemnation of Jesus for not being there when Lazarus died? What if she had rationalized the moment away...What will people say? Maybe I should go help Martha in the kitchen. What if Jesus thinks this is silly? There were so many moments she could have second guessed her heart. But she doesn't second guess.

In this one beautiful act, Mary teaches us the importance of leading from our own hearts by putting others needs in front of our own. It's what Paul refers to as a life built upon God's goodness, justice, and mercy...in our actions, in our words, in our souls. We do so not because of any reward we may get but because the love of Christ is so present for us that we can do nothing less than give that same love and compassion to the people in our lives.

Throughout Lent, we have meditated upon the necessity of repentance, of changing our ways to be more like Christ. Or, in today's Gospel, to be more like Mary...full of abundant grace and love. Lent is an opportunity to recognize where we have been more like Judas, making our relationships transactional. Or, when we have been like Jesus on the day Lazarus died and delayed doing the right thing for someone who needed us. Or, when we have been like Martha, pointing fingers at someone in judgement. Or, when we have simply withheld our hearts because of what others might say or because of our pride.

One of the many beautiful things about the Lenten season is that we have been given an opportunity to repent of the things we regret and we are offered redemption and a chance to pour expensive perfume on the things that need healing.

We do not have to let our past sins dictate our future. We can mend our relationships and heal our pain and restore those moments that have tainted our souls.

We can't create the same miracles that Jesus was able to create. But, we can create miracles of our own. Miracles of reconciliation that we may have thought impossible. Miracles of healing of the pain we have carried. Miracles of grace that we can offer one another.

Amen.

