

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

April 7, 2019
The Fifth Sunday in Lent

John 12:1-8
Isaiah 43:16-21
Psalm 126
Philippians 3:4b-14

I have always felt a little holy envy towards Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Maybe I feel a little envious towards anyone in the bible who got to be in close proximity to Jesus. The people who were healed by him. The people who talked to him or even just got to see him from time to time as he walked through their towns. But Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were different. They were Jesus' close friends. They were the people he could hang out with and share the mundane things of everyday life. You know those kind of friends....the ones who don't mind your messy house or your dirty clothes. The ones who know your secrets...good and bad. The one's who will sit with you on your worst days and your best days love you no matter what.

These four individuals were close. They loved each other, spent time together, laughed together and when Lazarus dies, we are told that Jesus wept.

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 friend, Jesus.

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 doing the things we have come to associate with his radical, miraculous ministry.

And then, in the midst of it all, his dear friend Lazarus dies. At first, when Jesus hears that Lazarus is ill, Jesus hesitates to go to him. He thinks Lazarus is just sick, nothing to be too concerned about. Jesus seems too caught up in his own ministry to take a break and as a result...he waits 2 days to go to Lazarus and by the time he gets there, Lazarus has already died. Martha accuses Jesus for delaying...Lord, if you had only been here. If only you had been here things would have been different. Her finger is pointed so drastically as she seems to accuse Jesus of a lack of empathy and responsiveness towards his friend. It's a painful moment to witness.

We can only assume how these words hit Jesus. Maybe he felt guilt. Maybe he was angry at Martha for saying the words she said. Whatever he felt, he was eventually overcome with a deep grief that he weeps. Suddenly, he calls out to those around him...Unbind him and let him go. Let Lazarus go for he is no longer dead.

I have often thought that Jesus' act of raising Lazarus from the dead was purely selfish, motivated by his own grief, driven by his own need to make amends for his unwillingness to go

to his friend when he was in need. Jesus' desire to have his friend back with him was overwhelming and he did the only thing he could do...he acts in the miraculous ways only Jesus can do. He creates this miracle and Lazarus is with him again.

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 they died. If only I had apologized for the wrong I had committed. If only I had told my family how much I appreciate them. If only I had said I love you more often. If only...

Lucky for Jesus that he got to change his "if only" moment. And so, we arrive at John chapter 12. 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. Mary who stands there full of gratitude, full of love, full of emotion overflowing for her friend who had done so much for her family. You might say, this is her "if only" moment.

Notice what happens...Mary was so overcome with joy, so full of gratitude for all that Jesus had given her that she responds in a gesture of incredible abundance. There is no hesitation. No second guessing. No excuses. No "maybe later's" or lists of other things she needs to do first. She pours this expensive perfume on Jesus' feet. We are told that it was so much perfume that the room fills with the fragrance of the oil. We know that historically, the amount of perfume she used was equal to about a year's worth of wages for a typical laborer in these times. But, for Mary, nothing else could come close to showing her appreciation for all that Jesus had done.

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 about what she should do or shouldn't do. She simply knows this is her moment to say thank you, to say I love you. I have a feeling that she never regretted her decision either.

This morning as I was making my long 2 minute drive to work...I was listening to a radio program called Rise Up and in those 2 minutes I heard exactly what this chapter in John conveys. The radio host asked people to call in and tell a story about someone who changed their life, a moment that redefined them in a profound way. A woman called in and relayed this story...

She said that in her 20's she was battling cancer and was staying at a local catholic hospital as she received treatment. She wasn't catholic herself, not particularly religious. Yet, one day this nun came in to sit with her a while. And in their conversation the nun told her directly that no one is guaranteed anything in this life...not length of life or abundant health. She said we don't know how long we have or how well we will be able to live the life we do have. But...we do have today and with each day we are to live with gratitude and joy.

And that one conversation changed everything. The lady who called in said she was so grateful for those words because now she views life as an opportunity to appreciate what she given, to love those in her life, to reach out with hope and care to those around her. She didn't live "if only" moments. She lived abundant moments. Like Mary she came to understand that today is the gift and it is worth our attention.

The point...God doesn't want us to live with regret. We may not get second chances. We may not get to tomorrow to say I love you or to visit a friend or to help a neighbor. But, we do have today. We have today to give with deep generosity, to help with a grateful heart, to love with overflowing joy. That's what God intends for our lives.

Amen.