



reLent: "rejoice"

John 12:1-8

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That must have been some dinner party. Can you imagine?

Martha, busy running around, preparing the meal, setting the table, serving the food, wanting everything to be just so.

Mary, well, who knows where Mary is. After all, she's always been that way. Never one for staying on task, or even staying in the room, apparently.

Lazarus sits quietly, not quite steady on his feet yet, still a little stunned from his four days in the grave, and, if we're being honest here, still a little smelly from the whole ordeal as well. It's not his fault — death stinks, no matter who you are — but even still, Martha quietly suggests he be sure to take the seat closest to the window.

And Jesus, watching it all. He loved them, John's gospel tells us. No explanation given, just a statement of fact. He loves them.

That's why his disciples are so quiet. They're watching him watch this family, this family that he loves. Of course, that's the not the only reason they are quiet. In the aftermath of death, no one ever has the right words. No one except Jesus, that is, who wept at Lazarus' grave and then roared at death to go away. "Come out," he called to his friend, and so Lazarus did.

No one else has known quite what to say since that moment. How do you find words to describe seeing what absolutely should have been impossible?

Only the temple authorities manage to express themselves. They gathered together and assessed the situation. "What are we to do?" they said. "If we let him go on like this, we'll

have every kind of trouble on our hands." So from that day on they planned to put him to death, and Jesus, aware of all of this, decides to visit his friends one last time.

I wonder how much Mary and Martha and Lazarus suspected. If this dinner party was a simple act of gratitude, or if they knew it to be much more than that?

In any case, Martha calls them to the table. Lazarus remembers his sister's quiet admonition and sits strategically. And finally, gathered together, food piled on their plates, they begin, finally, to talk, haltingly at first, but then eventually as if it were any ordinary day, any ordinary occasion. They talk, of their hopes and their dreams, their stories and their memories. And though they are careful to avoid any talk of death, the smell of those four days still lingers in Lazarus' hair and clings to his clothing, almost as if it were woven into the fabric itself. They do not talk about it, but they cannot change the facts: death stinks. It always has, and it always will. But they continue their meal, passing their plates and sipping from their cups, no one noticing that Mary has slipped away again.

And then, much like it went when Lazarus walked out of his tomb, they smell her before they see her. Or more specifically, they smell what she has in her hands — an enormous clay jar already unstopped, it's spicy scent filling the room, halting conversation mid-sentence. As they watch, she kneels down at Jesus' feet without saying a word, and she does four remarkable things in a row:

First she loosens her hair in a room full of men, which an honorable woman never does. Then she empties the jar of perfume, pouring all of it over Jesus' feet, which is, well, strange to say the least. Maybe if she had taken just a bit to anoint his head — people do that to kings — but not the feet. Then she touches him, a single woman rubbing a single man's feet. This, too, is unheard of, even among friends. Finally, she wipes the excess perfume off with her hair, a bizarre end to an all around bizarre series of events.¹

And there she stays, sitting at the feet of her friend, her teacher, just as she has before. As you might imagine, once again, no one knows what to say.

Judas eventually breaks the silence. "What have you done?" he asks in disbelief. "First of all, you've made a tremendous mess, but even more than that — what a waste! What a terrible, terrible waste!"

We're predisposed to dislike him — John even goes so far as to include parenthetical clues so we don't miss it — yeah, this guy is *that* guy. But truth be told, Judas' objections make sense. It was a waste. Wouldn't it have been better to buy food for the hungry people outside? Isn't that what Jesus himself taught them to do? Yes, Judas is a traitor and a scoundrel and a thief, but even still, his objection is ... reasonable. Entirely reasonable. There are hungry people. There are sick children. There are families without a place to sleep. All that perfume ... it could have made a difference. It could have changed things for the entire town of Bethany, a town whose very name means "House of the Afflicted." No matter what he does later, right now, Judas has a very *reasonable* point.

During my time at Village, the church I served previous to this, we embarked upon a capital campaign just shy of \$27 million. \$5 million alone was for a new organ in the

sanctuary. \$8 million was for additional renovations to the sanctuary, including making the chancel fully accessible. \$6 million was an addition onto the building, creating a community gathering space. And \$8 million was for mission, creating an endowed fund to ensure our giving would continue far into the future. But even still, no small number of faithful church members rightfully said, \$27 million sure could feed a lot of people. Or house a lot of people. Or send a lot of kids to school. \$27 million sure could do a lot more than make a big, beautiful building even bigger and more beautiful. And they were right. They were very *reasonable* in their observations and their objections.

Mary never intended for her gift to be reasonable, however, and Jesus was never especially reasonable in his ministry, either. If anything, he was known for abundance. He changed hundreds of gallons of water into hundreds of gallons of wine. He fed 5,000 people with a schoolboy's snack and had baskets of leftovers piled up after. And later, he will meet his disciples on the beach, where he will catch 153 different kinds of fish for them, in quantities so enormous all their nets begin to tear.

So no, Jesus does not take issue with Mary's extravagant gift. He simply sees it as love, just as his abundant acts are nothing less than love. This allows him to receive it with gratitude. Because here's the thing: Many extravagant gifts are put into the air, where they soon evaporate. A teacher labors over a lesson plan, delivers it, and then class is adjourned. Mourners provide floral arrangements honoring loved ones, but the flowers are fleeting. Today, the Saint Andrew's Chorale and Orchestra and the New York City Children's Chorus will perform a concert that will take your breath away. They have prepared for months, and it will be beautiful, but afterwards, it will be but a memory. Why do we do these things? Love has its reasons.²

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor's description of these four actions, in her sermon "The Prophet Mary."

² Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2, entry on the Fifth Sunday of Lent

Judas wants an explanation, but Jesus simply says, "Leave her alone. Leave her alone, because you will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me." His statement is as unexpected as Mary's actions. After all, Jesus is the champion of the poor, the healer of the sick, the seeker of the lost — he has always put others' needs ahead of his own, but now he changes his tune. "Leave her alone," he says. "Leave me alone. Just this once, let her look after me, because my time is running out."³

We can't say for sure what motivated Mary to do what she did. And we can't say for sure what anyone else in the room thought about it. But Jesus seems to have appreciated it. He seems to have seen deeper meaning in it. It was perfume — enormously large amounts of perfume — intended to anoint a body for burial. Surely some of it was used on Lazarus, but he was in the grave so long, the scent wore off, and the stench of death took over.

And so maybe Mary used it all because she wanted to be absolutely certain that whatever was coming for Jesus, the smell of that perfume would outlast it all. She was one of Jesus' earliest students in this lesson: that while yes, death stinks, love really is stronger and sweeter than the worst death can do.

To put all this in terms we can understand, Mary poured about a pint of perfume over Jesus' skin. A pint of perfume, as they all sat in stunned silence. Can you imagine?

I have never been to a dinner party anything like that. But if I had been, I would remember it. And Jesus remembers it, too. For the very next day, he gathers his friends around a table, and he feeds them, like Martha did. But first, wanting to teach them a lesson about servanthood, but perhaps even more than that, wanting to remind them how much they are loved, how extravagantly they are loved, he kneels at their feet, washes them, and wipes

them clean, like Mary did. And while he does not use any perfume, all that abundant oil soaked into his skin and seeped into his pores, so even as he uses simple, common water, they smell that spicy scent again, and they, too, remember. He, and they, remember together an extravagant, elaborate, utterly unreasonable demonstration of love.

And I wonder if that scent carries even further still. Is it possible it stayed with him as he carried his cross? That even as dust clung to his feet and sweat and blood mingled with it all, is it possible he could still smell that perfume, just a little, even if only in his imagination?

I hope that was the case. I hope that the smell of that perfume reminded him that it more than covered up the smell of death before, insisting death would not get the final word. So I hope it was there again with him at the end, insisting the very same thing. Because one extravagant, elaborate, utterly unreasonable act of love almost always leads to another.

Let us not get too far ahead ourselves, however. For now, we are still in Bethany. And while we know enough to know that bad things are coming, we do not have to be afraid. Because what has always been true, remains true. "When Jesus is involved, wherever Jesus shows up, whatever is needed, there will be more than enough to go around. Whatever is spent, there will be plenty left over. There is no reason to fear running out — of perfume, or of life. Because Jesus always provides, offering far more than we can ask or imagine."⁴

If you don't believe it today, or can't believe it today, that's okay. Just keep watch over the weeks to come.

³ Taylor, "The Prophet Mary"

⁴ Taylor, "The Prophet Mary"