

We just heard the story from John ch12. At a dinner party, Mary of Bethany anoints Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair. But this is not an isolated incident. The context is everything.

This supper takes place on a Saturday night. The next day is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week. This supper is 5 days before the Last Supper that following Thursday. In fact, some scholars have nicknamed the Supper at Bethany as the "Second to the Last Supper."

And this supper is 6 days before Good Friday. In less than a week, Jesus will be dead and buried. The shadow of impending death hangs over this supper in a very real way.

And who is Jesus eating with? Mary, and her sister Martha, and their brother Lazarus.

Lazarus? Just the chapter before in John 11, Lazarus was dead. So in today's Gospel, the shadow of death is not just something in the near future with Jesus' death. It was also in the recent past with Lazarus's death.

You may remember the story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead. In John ch11, Jesus leaves behind the safety of being far away from Jerusalem. And he travels to the Jerusalem suburb of Bethany in order to raise his friend, Lazarus. By travelling to the stronghold of his enemies who are wanting to kill him, Jesus in a real way is showing he is ready to trade his life for the life of his friend.

The irony is thick. The dead Lazarus will end up outliving Jesus, the Lord of Resurrection and Life.

At the Second to the Last Supper in Bethany, the shadow of death hangs over the party. And I would guess that the smell of death also hangs in the air. In ch11, Mary and Martha were afraid to have their brother's tomb opened because they were afraid of the stench of his decaying corpse. But now, in ch12, he's sitting at the dinner table with him.

Does he still smell like the grave? Is there a lingering hint of decay? Is there a hint of some of the spices he was buried with to mask the smell? But whether or not the actual smell of death is hovering over Lazarus, in a very real way the smell of death is hovering over the whole dinner party, the whole Second to the Last Supper. Lazarus has been brought back from death. Jesus is about to go to his death.

But John tells us of another smell. It is an overwhelming smell. At the Second to the Last Supper, Mary takes some very expensive perfumed oil and pours it over Jesus' feet. It is made of nard. It has a powerful aroma that is at once sweet and spicy and musky. John says that, "The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume."¹

It is a powerful smell. It is an extravagant smell. It would be perceived as either extravagantly loving or extravagantly shocking.

¹ Jn 12:3

Judas is shocked. His mind goes to the bottom line. What a waste. 300 denarii. The salary for 300 day's work. Given their culture with a 6-day work week and a few holidays, we're basically talking about a whole year's wages. A year's salary blown on a fancy bottle of perfume? And the perfume wasted by pouring it on Jesus' feet? Extravagantly shocking.

But that's not how Jesus sees it. Mary and Martha and Lazarus are his dear friends. And Jesus sees Mary's act as a loving act. She is preparing his body for burial. She can perceive that his death is coming. And she's trying to show the depths of her love for him while she still has time to do it. The Resurrection is not on her radar screen. She only sees Jesus' death. She's trying to prepare her friend for his death. And she's probably trying to prepare herself to deal with her friend's death as well.

And her next action is strange as well. Mary wipes Jesus' feet with her hair. Again, that's an act which is either extravagantly loving or extravagantly shocking.

In that culture, a single woman would NEVER let her hair down in front of a man, and a married woman would only do it in private with her husband. At a public party, letting down your hair and wiping a man's feet with it would have been bizarre behavior.

We don't have an equivalent in our culture, but perhaps we can come close. Imagine that you're at a dinner party. And in the middle of the party, the hostess gets up and hikes her skirt. Then she starts publicly rubbing her leg on the guest of honor. It would probably make all the guests uncomfortable at the very least, if not outright shocked. For Mary to rub Jesus' feet with her hair would likewise have seemed extravagantly shocking, probably with heavy erotic overtones.

And yet, as a priest, I've been privileged to be around a number of people as they were dying. And as a person's loved one approaches death, it's a very natural human reaction to touch them as they prepare to die. In other circumstances, stroking someone's forehead, or rubbing their feet, or hugging or kissing them might be interpreted in romantic or erotic ways. But as a person is dying, lovingly touching a parent, or grandparent, or child, or dear friend seems perfectly natural.

I believe that's what's happening with Mary. Her behavior might be perceived as extravagantly shocking. But I believe it is extravagantly loving, again preparing a dear friend for his impending death and burial.

At the Second to the Last Supper in John, Mary acts in extravagant ways. Some find it extravagantly shocking. But it is, at heart, extravagantly loving.

And 5 days later at the Last Supper, Jesus will also act in a way that is either extravagantly shocking or extravagantly loving. In the next chapter, ch13, John tells us that "Jesus knew that (the hour of his death) had come... (and) having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end."²

² Jn 13:1

On Maundy Thursday, at the Last Supper, Jesus takes on the role of a slave, and washes his own disciples' feet.

The extravagant humility of this act shocks Peter. At first, Peter refuses to have his feet washed. But Jesus intends it to be a sign of extravagant love. And after washing his disciples' feet, he gives them a new command, a *novum mandatum*. The Latin word "mandatum" gives us the word "Maundy" in Maundy Thursday. It is the night of the mandate, the night of the new commandment. Jesus says, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."³

And the next day, on the Friday we call Good, Jesus' gives himself up to death. Again, it is either extravagantly shocking or extravagantly loving.

It is a brutal death, a shocking death by slow and agonizing torture on a Roman cross. But it is also an act of extravagant love.

6 days earlier, at the Second to the Last Supper, Mary lavishly pours out expensive and valuable perfume to anoint Jesus.

On the Cross, Jesus lavishly pours out his own life, the life of the incarnate Son of God. Jesus shows the extravagance of God's love made flesh. Jesus shows the extravagance of God's mercy by pouring out his own precious blood to cleanse the sins of the world.

Last week, we heard the Parable of the Prodigal Son, and about the extravagant love of the Father.

This week we see Mary of Bethany's extravagant love for her Lord.

Next week we will begin Passion Week, Holy Week, Passiontide. We will see the fullest expression of God's extravagant love made visible and manifest on the Cross of Jesus Christ.

*What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul?
What wondrous love is this?⁴*

It is amazing love. The extravagant love shown by Mary of Bethany at the Second to Last Supper points ahead to the even more extravagant and even more amazing love shown by Jesus as he undergoes his Passion later on in that week. And we are the recipients of that love.

Jesus will pour out his love. Jesus will pour out his blood. Jesus will pour out his life, to the very last drop. It seems like such a waste.

But to God, it is worth it. We are worth it. Not because of anything we do. But simply because of God's wondrous, extravagant love for all of us.

³ Jn 13:34

⁴ Hymnal #439

