

Let me just say this - I'm aware that it feels like death is all around us lately, not even lately but for the last two year we've tracked deaths and passed milestones, we've watched war and again heard numbers; and we've mourned our own and will again for Osako. This sermon talks about another kind of death - death of all the things that bind and own us. The death of self is not a metaphor, not a slap of disrespect to the real thing. It is the hope we have that suffering might lessen; As Jesus says, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal.

So, one more time where Mary is the center of attention. This time though, it isn't her sister Martha that rebukes her. It is Judas. Pointing out the value of the perfumed oil she is anointing Jesus with and suggesting that she is being frivolous with something of such great value.

When I hear this scripture, I get stuck on the closing words of Jesus; I bet some of you do as well. We get distracted by what Jesus says - no one, no one thinks Jesus doesn't have a heart for the poor. His words were in reaction to Judas' false concern for the poor.

The heart of this scripture is the contrast between Mary and Judas. But, both were aware that as Jesus moved toward Jerusalem he moved closer to death.

We too know what's coming - Jesus' death; but that's not the death Lent is about. Lent asks us to focus on the many deaths that we must undergo to open ourselves to Jesus. Mary revels in that death of going beyond self. She holds nothing back. The oil she anoints Jesus with is precious, costing more than a workman's yearly wage.

She did not measure out how much of her costly oil she was going to use on Jesus. She just gave it all, so the house was filled with its perfume; so that she could communicate her love and her awareness that Jesus was going to die soon. She anoints

him as if for burial. It will be more than a week before Jesus is laid in his tomb, the oil and its perfume will have faded, been washed away but Mary is not interested in how long her gift will last. She is interested in giving her best to Jesus; perhaps giving so much that the oil overflows and Mary, so intent on her gift, doesn't go for a cloth but uses her hair to spread the oil on his feet.

In Lent we are asked to turn away from the things that distract or absorb us so much that we have no space left for the things of Jesus. Another person could have hoarded the Nard that Mary lavishes on Jesus. Another person could have used it for a dowry or as a sign of wealth. But this person, Mary, uses it to anoint Jesus, to show her love with no thought of the cost.

What is it that tethers us, that prevents us from being able to give without counting the cost, the thing that we think we need, no not the thing we think we need, we perhaps, don't even realize that something we prize or cling to draws us away from Jesus. In the small group Lenten study this past week we were asked to talk and think about the presence of God - where we see it; where we miss it; how we can make our awareness of God's presence more clear. Most of the responses, at least my response, were about time, about making time for God; doing something in that time that can connect us with God; something that whatever the result, declares our intention, our desire, to be in the presence of God.

When I count the cost, allot a certain amount of time I am very aware of it, of the time used, the time left. I check the clock. Is it over yet - can I move on to my errands now? But when my desire is paramount, when our desire is paramount when we are sincere, when we don't count the cost we are unaware of the time we've spent but keenly aware of God's presence.

We think of Lent as the time we consciously turn away from Sin. At the vigil for peace on Wednesday, we were asked to turn away

from the self-protection, the insulation, the unwillingness to look into the world's pain. We were asked to acknowledge our reluctance to let what we see of the world's anguish penetrate our defenses. We were asked to turn toward the suffering in the world; to look at the face of war. In giving up the protective shell, we make ourselves vulnerable, susceptible to what is really happening in the pictures we see; in the accounts we've read; the testimony we've heard. We are asked to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep, or with those who are too stunned to weep, that is the essence of Christianity. We are asked to really see the poor who are always with us; those we often turn away from. We cannot let the part of us that is only willing to look at those things we can fix, we cannot let that stop us from turning toward the hurt of the world.

If we didn't know the guests at this dinner and just heard what Judas said we might think that he is focused on the pain of the world; that he is speaking up for the poor however rudely.

But we are told what Judas' motive is in objecting to Mary's liberality. Judas, keeper of the treasury, thought the cost of a whole jar of Nard might be a nice addition to the kitty he occasionally helped himself to.

Because we've read this story before and know who the bad guys are and who the good guys are, we do not expect anything better from Judas.

But being the bleeding heart liberal that I am, I look for deeper, more personal reasons behind Judas' behavior that day. Maybe it isn't so much my bleeding heart as it is seeing myself in Judas', my familiarity with Judas' false righteousness that makes me look for another dynamic. In a way it is just the opposite of Mary. Judas looks at everything through a lens of self - from how much money he can steal to how charitable a person he is. Judas, standing in the doorway marvels at Mary's actions. He can't imagine doing such a thing himself; if he had a full jar of Nard

you can bet he would not be wasting it - "wasting it" on Jesus. Whether a waste or not, Judas cannot imagine himself being so liberal with anything of his that is of such great value. He's astounded. Knowing the thoughts going through his head, he feels that Mary is showing him up. I mean how is he supposed to compete with that? I mean is that the extent Jesus wants him to go to? Damn her! A tablespoon would have been enough.

And it would have, if it had been given with the same abandon with which Mary gives. That's the piece that Judas doesn't get - the love that Jesus wants us to give is the death of going beyond self. It isn't about this moment or this gift - it is about how we live; what lens we look through.

We've recently moved into an apartment building. It has 53 apartments and 1 elevator. We live on the top floor so we've seen a lot of new people. And if it were up to me, that would be the case "seen a lot of new people"; but everytime we encounter someone new, Carol sticks her hand out and says; "Hi, I'm Carol and this is my wife Judy. We just moved in. What's your name?" Or she might say, "Hi Dave. I don't think you've met my wife, Judy." What is this a cocktail party? And how does Carol remember all **these** people when she often calls me by the name of her last partner? She writes it down!!!! She adds details - black dog, always wears shorts, tall. She is not doing that to feel good about herself, she is doing it so she can get to know who the people are.

My hesitation is not because I don't want to know people, or that I'm afraid of new people. My hesitation is all about me - what if I'm introducing myself to the Uber deliverer and not a tenant? What if I am rebuffed? What if the other person is not an English speaker and our exchange is awkward. What if I I I I I I I I look bad? That is the lens I'm using.

What Mary shows us is what it's like to look without a lens; to act without an agenda. Mary shows us what it is like to die to self

and to be reborn outside the self, beyond the self, awakening to new life. A life where we can give without counting the cost; a life where we can look at suffering. Where the images that flash before us are real, where their pain is real to us. It is not just that we are more closely touched by the suffering of others, it is that what we put out in the world is compassion, love;

It is true we can't fix it - Steve Garness Holmes

Rev. Judy Arnold

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