

Sunday, April 6, 2025
Fifth Sunday in Lent (Year C)

John 12.1-8

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1125877872560199>

(Sermon begins at about 14:35)

“Circling the Wagons”

Sometimes being a loving, caring community takes its toll. On those charged with the leadership and care of the community, as well as on the individual members comprising that community. This is something we are currently experiencing here at St. Gregory's. In the space of 26 days—not even a whole month—we have experienced the loss of five beloved members of our community. Two of those occurring just this past week, on Wednesday and Thursday. This in a week in which we also had the funeral service for David Feit-Pretzer, our previous, long-time organist and music director, and the first of those to die just four weeks ago. Even though some of these dearly departed may not have been known to many of you, the collective loss experienced by those who did know them, and the resulting collective loss experienced by the parish community, is numbing. Each subsequent death adding to the cumulative numbness. Each subsequent death subtracting from the vitality of the community. I feel it acutely. And I know a number of you do, as well. Questioning, what is happening here? Not that there is any real answer. And yet, in times like this, in times of even one loss, let alone so many, we seek something to help us cope. Something to help us get through the grief, the sorrow, the sense of being diminished as a body, and the resulting sense of numbness and disbelief.

Today's Gospel reading just happens to provide some insight, some guidance. A healing balm, not unlike the perfume Mary uses to anoint Jesus' feet.

Jesus has been making his way from Galilee to Jerusalem. Along the way, he informed his disciples of the purpose of this trip. That in Jerusalem, he would be killed. As they draw closer to Jerusalem, the disciples are undoubtedly feeling a full range of emotions: sorrow, grief, anger, confusion, numbness, denial.

Jesus has one final stop to make before entering Jerusalem. Bethany. The home of his dear friends Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. Friends he has visited a number of times on other trips to Jerusalem. So close that they were really more like family. Such was the bond between Jesus and the three siblings. The stop at Bethany would serve two purposes. One, it would be a convenient last stop before actually entering Jerusalem. Bethany is located on the other side of the Mount of Olives, just two miles from Jerusalem. A good launching point for Jesus to make his triumphal entry down the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem the next day. And the second purpose would be to tell his dear friends what was to happen, and to say his final goodbyes to those who had been such a great source of care and support to him throughout his ministry.

This is the backdrop for what unfolds in today's Gospel reading. The dinner that Lazarus, Mary, and Martha have for Jesus is not just any ordinary dinner. It is their last dinner with him and for

him before seeing him off the next morning on the final leg of his journey to Jerusalem. A dinner that undoubtedly included Jesus' disciples and perhaps other friends who had also been supportive of Jesus over the years.

After dinner, "Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus feet, and wiped them with her hair." A very tender and intimate action. And one of great extravagance. As we hear when Judas rebukes her, the perfume could have been sold for three hundred denarii—nearly a year's wages for a common laborer. While the account notes that Judas rebuked Mary for the wasteful extravagance because he was a thief, implying he was angry that this would decrease his potential "take," maybe we can cut him a little slack, given the circumstances. Maybe we can extend a little grace and give him a little credit. Perhaps he was lashing out in anger because of his own grief and denial over Jesus' impending death. Perhaps he was merely expressing—albeit misplaced and inappropriately—what many of the others present were feeling in the moment. Recognizing Mary's action for what it was. Recognizing it for what Jesus expresses in his rebuke of Judas: "She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." Recognizing that in anointing Jesus on the eve of his entry into Jerusalem, on the metaphorical eve of the death he foretold, she is preparing Jesus for death. She is preparing his body for burial.

The scene in the home of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha in Bethany is one of anticipatory grief. They have learned of the impending and imminent death of their friend, their teacher, their Messiah. They are grieving that loss. Mary's actions are a sacramental act which serve to honor and sanctify what they are feeling, while also redeeming and sanctifying the sacrifice that will occur on their behalf. In this, there was a communal element to what Mary did. It was not just her private act of devotion to Jesus. Hers was a communal act, performed on behalf of all those present.

Returning momentarily to the grief we have been experiencing as a community, we can see a mirror, as it were, of the grief of those gathered in Bethany. The events of our own grief—the death of our brother and sisters—being preceded by the sacramental anointing of those who have died. When I performed the Ministration at the Time of Death, commonly referred to as Last Rites, four times in three and a half weeks. When I anointed David with holy oil, preparing him for his death. When, a week later, I anointed Barbara with holy oil, preparing her for her death. When, a week and a half later, I anointed Betty with holy oil, preparing her for her death. When, a week later, I anointed Karen with holy oil, preparing her for her death. And while I was not able to anoint Anita, I know she did receive anointing and Last Rites, and I was at least able to pray for her over the phone, lifting my own prayer of preparation for her death. In all of these cases, helping to prepare our siblings in Christ for their own final journey, just as Mary prepared Jesus for his final journey. And as I performed these sacramental acts, recognizing that just as Mary's was a communal act, my performing of the Last Rites for our siblings was a communal act, done on your behalf. As an expression of our community's love for each of them. Part of our community bidding farewell to our beloveds.

Mary's act of anointing Jesus' feet foreshadows another action that would be performed by Jesus five days after. When, at the Last Supper, Jesus washes his disciples' feet. Preparing them for the journey they would be taking, even as he would be making his final journey to the cross

the next day. The journey they would be taking post-crucifixion and post-resurrection, as they continue his mission and ministry in the world. The journey that would lay the foundation for the Church as the Body of Christ in the world. After washing the disciples' feet, Jesus gives them their marching orders: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13.34-35).

In this new commandment, Jesus is emphasizing the importance of community. Of how to be community in the truest sense. It is this centrality of community that is foundational to who we are as Church. Foundational to who we are as the Body of Christ in the world. Foundational to who we are as St. Gregory's Parish. Perhaps his experience in Bethany inspired Jesus' own actions with his disciples at the Last Supper. Perhaps Mary anointing his feet inspired Jesus to wash the feet of his disciples. Perhaps Mary's expression of her own love and devotion performed on behalf of the gathered community inspired Jesus' reflection on the importance and centrality of loving one another, particularly in times of grief and loss.

As we face our own loss, our own sense of grief, sorrow, and the cumulative numbness they engender, perhaps we can turn to Mary of Bethany as our guide. One who gathered her community of loved ones in a time of impending loss. One who freely and extravagantly demonstrated her love. One who, in her action was able to transform not only her own, but also her community's feelings of grief, uncertainty, and numbness into a sacramental act of love; honoring and sanctifying a cherished relationship. What this means for us is finding those ways in which we can come together and be together in our own sense of grief, uncertainty, and numbness, to be willing to be vulnerable, and to support one another as siblings in Christ. Recognizing that we are not alone. That we are together as community. That we are together as family. That we are supported by a loving God who knows grief and loss just as we do.

Perhaps the best statement of this came in the form of a text message from a parishioner upon notification of the latest death on Thursday: "Maybe our 'lesson' is to 'circle the wagons' and gather our family in the healing power of God's love. Just sayin' because there doesn't seem to be anything else to do." Yet, that is precisely what Mary of Bethany did with her community. That is precisely what she would advise us to do. And that is precisely what will get us through this and whatever else comes our way.