

## Filling the House

Isaiah 43:16-21; John 12:1-8

I'm a numbers kind of pastor. I can even measure my self-worth by it. That is, I can tell you what the average number of people were in English worship as reported to last month's Session, and track attendance numbers carefully. Most of us do.

There's a curious thing about this dinner party that John says was hosted by Mary, Martha and Lazarus six days before Passover. We don't know how many people were there. We know Jesus and Judas were there. And we think the Twelve were there. Since we have no other record of Judas being somewhere the other 11 disciples were not (except in the Garden of Gethsemane), we can guess this was a dinner for 16. So if you're counting, it was a house full. But that's not the filling the house I'm talking about.

My father was a soldier in World War 2. After the defeat of Germany he was posted to Mannheim, Germany to prepare to be shipped to off the coast of Japan. Just before being shipped out a USO show came to his base. (The USO is an organization that brings celebrities, usually actors and singers to our soldiers, sailors and marines serving overseas.) The comedian Jack Benny and the actress Ingrid Bergman came to his base. He tells me he can still remember the smell of Ingrid Bergman's apple blossom perfume from that day over 70 years ago.

I am told of the senses of taste, touch, smell, sight and sound, that smell is the most memorable. I am not sure of that—the other senses seem very powerful as well. But at least for the Evangelist John it was recalled many years later that Mary's fragrance, not the disciples filled the house.

Mary was showing Jesus, the others and herself her deep love and devotion of Jesus. This is remarkable.

When I worked for Habitat for Humanity as their executive director we only partnered with families whose income was considered by the federal government as low. In 2008 that meant for a family of 4 you made no more than \$28,000.

Now considering Martha, Mary and Lazarus were a family of three, and Judas estimated the worth of the perfume at 300 days wages, by my count Mary poured about \$30,000 worth of perfume on Jesus' feet. Like Judas, we have to wonder, was Mary crazy? But crazy and foolishness is what love and devotion do.

There are two ways to miss the extravagance of Mary's act.

The first is to focus on the predictive power of Jesus' statement, "she did it to prepare me for my burial." I believe as a fully human person Jesus had a deep sense that his final trip to Jerusalem was not going to end well. I don't believe he knew all the details of his death, much less his resurrection. I know there are multiple statements in the gospel like "destroy this body and after three days I will be raised from the dead." I believe those are post-resurrection memories of what Jesus said. As my favorite John scholar [Raymond S. Brown] says, "post-resurrectional faith illumined the memories of what the disciples had seen and heard during the pre-resurrectional period, and so [the Evangelists] proclaimed Jesus' words and deeds with enriched significance."

The same goes for his statement about being prepared for a burial. Jesus knew he had to speak the truth about God and God's kingdom even if it meant his execution. But he did not know exactly how Judas was going to betray him, Peter deny him and Pilate and Herod execute him. We miss Mary's act if we focus on Jesus' prediction of his death.

We also miss Mary's act of love and devotion if we focus on Judas' statement that the perfume was worth about \$30,000 in today's dollars. As one of our "contemplatives" noted last week in Sunrise Prayer, Judas had a valid point. 300 days' wages is a lot of money to spend on wiping someone's feet. Yes, Judas was a scoundrel. He not only betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver but he had his hand in the till. But that is not the focus of this passage.

Mary's love and devotion is.

When I was a younger pastor I was sent to the closest nursing home, and told to lead a Christian worship service. I recall somewhere being told that usually the Christian songs we have inside of us are one of the last things we forget. The two

songs all of the seniors in the nursing home seemed to know were “The Old Rugged Cross” and “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” So what do you think we sang once a month when I was leading the service? You guessed it.

Presbyterians don’t sing those two songs very much. At least not anymore, even if it was the first song someone requested when we had a favorites Sunday a while back.

In 1998 I was saying goodbye to a congregation after 2 years of service and it happened to be the Sunday closest to the Ascension of Jesus. The point of my sermon was because Jesus lived among us for 33 years he actually knows what it’s like to be fully human. As Sally Fields said at the Academy Awards once, “He likes us, he really likes us.” So I had that church sing “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” A long-time member came up to me afterwards and said “I haven’t sung that song in this church in 30 years.”

Maybe we don’t sing that song because Presbyterian Christians are uncomfortable expressing unbridled affection for Jesus in their worship, or even their conversation. Perhaps it seems too sappy, or fundamentalist, or what a friend of mine calls “me and Jesus.” We need to look at Mary though. Where did she ever get a bottle of perfume worth \$30,000? Why did she think it was a good idea to pour it all out on Jesus’ feet? It’s because that was Mary’s way of showing that she loved him dearly. Martha showed it another way. “Martha served.” Mary, however, wasn’t ashamed to be considered a fool, a fool for Jesus.

When I was a teenager there was a group called *Love Song*. It was led by a cool, full-bearded keyboardist named Chuck Girard. When you’re a teenager there’s a deep desire to fit in. But Chuck Girard and *Love Song* gave me permission to be different. The lyrics don’t translate well without the music. But I can hear Mary singing these words, too.

People try to tell me that I can't live this way  
That things have changed and life is not the same  
And they try to tell me that I'm missing all the fun  
But I know this peace I've found has only now begun

Some have tried to tell me to live and just be free  
That we must seek life's pleasures while they last  
And they try to tell me that these are modern days  
And that I'm just a fool to go on living in the past

Someone's always tryin' to shake my faith and bring me down  
But all I know is what I feel inside  
People to try to tell me that I am just a fool  
But I guess I'll be a fool for Jesus  
But I guess I'll be a fool for Jesus

In 12 days is Good Friday. In 14 days is Easter. I have a lot of conflicting emotions. Am I supposed to be sad because Jesus paid the ultimate price? Am I supposed to be happy because we all know Easter's coming? How 'bout Holy Week? Is the fact that we commemorate that Jesus will die by week's end strong enough to make me holy? You and I should forget about what we *should* be. We're invited to just get the perfume off the shelf and anoint Jesus for his burial. Be extravagant. For this fortnight--these two weeks--let your mind and heart focus on the love that prompted Jesus to go the distance come. Focus on the love.

It is a most purifying devotion.

Ten days ago the church book club talked about David Brooks' latest book, *The Road to Character*. David Brooks is as sharp as a tack, and has clearly been doing a lot of thinking (with conservative evangelical Christians) about what makes the good life. I regret I wasn't there for the discussion.

But what I found missing in David Brooks' book was the person that makes our faith come together. As Martin Buber, the great Jewish thinker said, we have a I-Thou relationship with God, not an I-It relationship. God, including Jesus and the Holy Spirit are persons, not forces or merely beings. And persons have personalities. They can be grieved, delighted, happy or sad. You and I don't worship a set of beliefs.

We don't follow a disembodied, *impersonal* set of Ten Commandments or the "essential tenets of the Reformed faith."

The other day a few of us went down to San Diego to meet with the Moderator of the General Assembly. One person praised the essential tenets of the Reformed Faith and implied that if all Presbyterians just followed them the PCUSA would be healthy and whole. Beliefs, the Ten Commandments, and the essential tenets matter. But they pale in comparison to the person and work of Jesus. He was fully human like you and me. After his death, resurrection and ascension we *realized* that he was fully divine *unlike* any of us. But it's the acts of devotion to him that change us, and make us whole. We can sing Bernard of Clairveaux's words (as we will in a little bit) because devotion to him is not wasted.

When this same John was near the end of his life he wrote a second act. We know it as 1 John. The sense he employs is the sense of sight, but he takes us to the end of our devotion. John writes [3:2-3]: "Dear friends, we are now God's children; what we shall be has not yet been disclosed, but we know that when Christ appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who grasps this hope is pure."

Just one look, that's all it took. Look at Jesus. Get the ridiculously expensive perfume off the shelf. We are spending it all on him.

Why the focus on numbers? Put our egos aside. Devotion is the better part. Devotion is the work of one, two or many. To find our way to the Cross and Empty Tomb, extravagant devotion must come first. That's what must fill this house. Amen? **Amen.**