Waiting to Inhale:
5. Aroma of Love

A sermon preached by
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Text:
John 12: 1-11

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Lent 5

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John 12:1-11

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

What is the aroma of love? Wine and chocolates and roses? Coffee in bed in the morning?

The aroma of love is that which surrounds us in God’s inhaling and exhaling so that this existence we live could come into being. The aroma of love is that which leads us through the wilderness that we call Lent. The aroma of love is that which gathers us at the foot of the cross when God’s love overwhelms and God’s chosen one inhales our brokenness and exhales forgiveness into our imperfection.

Remember where we started our Lenten journey 5 weeks ago.

A deep breath. A full exhale.

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” (Genesis 1:1)

“God formed humans from the dust of the ground, and breathed into their nostrils the breath of life; and the human became a living being.” (Genesis 2:7)

Inhale. Exhale.

God’s creative act puts into motion that which we call life; creation comes to life in a selfless act of a willing, loving God. The wind of God sweeps across the void; the breath of God blows into our nostrils so that we might live out God’s love in this created world.

It is only through God’s unconditional love for us and God’s unconditional love of us that the world in which we live comes into existence. And, in fact, it is what brings humanity into being. The spirit of God sweeps across the face of the void which God had brought into being by inhaling fully and then into that void God breathes – exhales – so that we might live.

I shared with you theologian Jürgen Moltmann point about creatio ex nihilo – creation out of nothingness. “God does not create merely by calling something into existence,” writes Moltmann, “or by setting something afoot. In a more profound sense God ‘creates’ by letting-be, by making room, and by withdrawing God’s self.” God fully inhales to make room for a selfless act of creating – God breathes in completely so that now there is room for the nothingness and then from there God can exhale so that creation can happen.

God does not need us – did not need to create – because God simply was and is and always will be. Yet God chose to make room in the nothingness that resulted when God withdrew that breath so that when God exhaled life came into being.
Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem. At this point in John’s Gospel, he has returned to Bethany – the home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus who has brought back to life. Bethany is just outside Jerusalem and a place for Passover pilgrims to make that final stop for rest and provisions as they climb the hill and enter into the great gates of the Holy City where throngs of people have gathered for this most important festival on the calendar. Bethany is a place to catch your breath before the last leg of the journey.

It is here that Jesus and Mary and Martha and Lazarus and others share a meal together. In the midst of the ritual of this Middle Eastern festive meal, Mary sits at the feet of a reclining Jesus. She offers her alabaster jar of perfume and washes Jesus feet using her hair to wipe them clean. Judas – perhaps representing the view of all of the disciples – complains. “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?”

A denarius is equivalent to what a common laborer would have earned in a day. If today a laborer is paid $15 per hour and works an 8 hour day, that’s $120. The disciples complain that this perfume of Mary’s might have sold for 300 denarii – 300 days wages – a year of salary. Today’s laborer at $15 per hour earns $36,000 in 300 days. Can you imagine perfume which costs $36,000? This is a huge gift which Mary has placed at the feet of her friend, Jesus. Mary must be a woman of means, a wealthy family in Bethany sharing all that they have as a way, perhaps, of giving thanks for what Jesus has done for them in the return of Lazarus from death’s door.

Irish novelist, Colm Tóibín, in his fascinating recent book *The Testament of Mary*, tells the story of Jesus through the eyes of his mother Mary after his crucifixion and resurrection. Tóibín’s Mary is sometimes bitter and angry, sometimes confused and perplexed – she refers to the followers of Jesus as “a group of misfits, who were only children like himself, or men without fathers, or men who could nor look a woman in the eye. Men who were seen smiling to themselves, or had grown old when they were still young.”

Jesus stood silently at Lazarus tomb for a time:

And then in a voice like a whisper he ordered the grave to be dug up while Martha, screaming now, afraid that what she had asked for was being granted, cried that they had suffered enough and the body would be stinking and rotting after its time in the earth, but my son insisted and the crowd stood by as the grave was opened and the soft earth lifted from where it lay over Lazarus’s body.

Because of what happened at Bethany, John’s Gospel tells us, the Temple leaders were determined that Jesus must be stopped and from this point on Jesus didn’t travel openly among those whose power he had been challenging. Jesus went from Bethany to Ephraim, about 12 miles northeast of Jerusalem, and stayed there. Eventually, though, Jesus must confront the power structures in Jerusalem – the Temple authorities and the Romans – which means risking his life by entering the gates.

John sets Jesus back in Bethany just 6 days before the Passover and, in hindsight we know, will take him to a brutal death by crucifixion. Surely Jesus knew that what he was facing was likely to kill him. Even though they didn’t understand it, he had been talking to his closest friends about it. Even here just a week before they are complaining – whining like children about the temporary things of this world rather than the life-changing things of God’s realm which they were to create on earth.

But Mary seems to have known. She grasped the gravity of the situation. She understood the real possibility of death for this friend who she loved. Death was in the air.
Rev. Janet Hunt tells the story of her father’s recent heart surgery and his struggling on the edge of death:

My dad was sick. We were deep into the long, hot summer after his first surgery and his recovery was, to put it simply, not going well.

Several of us were home to visit. Daddy sat up in his recliner --- his legs stretched out, swollen still from where they had removed the veins for his heart bypass surgery. The rest of us were settled in around the room, running out of things to say to fill the silence. It was impossible to ignore the illness that was ever present among us now. I expect it was why we had gathered then.

It was in the midst of that long silence that my sister, Martha, suddenly jumped up and left the room. When she returned, she carried a bottle of hand lotion. She knelt before my dad's outstretched legs, poured the lotion into her hands and warmed it before ever so gently rubbing it into his tortured limbs.

I imagine even the pungent fragrance of that expensive perfume [that Mary used in the Bethany story] could not cover up the odor of impending death that was also ever present on that day so long ago. I know that smell, perhaps you do, too.

Death was in the air at Bethany that day. Here was Lazarus who had been to the grave and was back again. Is there a lingering odor of the grave in his veins and in his sweat? How does one come back from the dead and walk again among the living? Not an easy life as Mary describes it in Tobin’s novel – he can barely stand up any more, he is dazed and confused, headed for death again like the rest of us for the first time. The smell is not good.

Into that room Mary breaks open a pound of spikenard. “The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.”

My dad hated the smell of Revlon’s Jean Naté and, without fail, my mom would receive some of it for Christmas – a Pollyanna gift from one of her adult Sunday School class members. Sometimes I wonder if they did it just because my dad hated it so much. Eau de toilet, the bottle would say – “Toilet water,” dad would say, “and that’s exactly where it belongs.” And mom would obligingly pour it into the porcelain throne. I don’t know if she liked Jean Naté, but she wouldn’t wear it – which was just fine because I would always give her her favorite, Chantilly Dusting Powder. Even today, if I can find it, I’ll buy it for mom. It’s how moms are supposed to smell – the fragrance is deep in her pores at age 88 – I suspect she could never smell any differently.

So too with Mary. At a time when there are no over-the-counter generic fragrances so that a million people wear Right Guard and possibly smell similar, in ancient times fragrances like this were mixed to whatever distinctive smell one wants. This is Mary’s perfume – this smells like Mary – if you entered a room that Mary was in or had recently been in, you probably knew that she was there. After all, she has $36,000 of it.

Clive Christian No. 1, Imperial Majesty Perfume, is the most expensive perfume in our world – in 2012 it cost $12,721.89 per ounce so Mary would have had about 3 ounces of it.

This is an act of intense love, love that knows no boundaries, extravagant love. This act of love is a reflection of Mary’s deep understanding, far beyond what any other disciple understood, of what Jesus is asking of all of us. Love beyond what you think love is. Be willing to put all into the relationships you have with others – no matter the cost, no matter the risk, no matter the potential fallout. Love that knows no boundaries is a true modeling of the love that God has for us.
Inhale that reality. Exhale that sigh of relief.

If God’s love for us is so complete that God would risk walking among us knowing that we would probably just as soon put God to death than accept that God might love that fully. God inhales to make room for us; God exhales and we are created. Love.

The aroma of love filled the room that day in Bethany. Once the stopper is out of the bottle the fragrance lingers in the air. And once the perfume is poured on Jesus feet and rubbed into his skin, that fragrance stays with him for a long time. Remember, bathing is not as common an act in the 1st Century as it is today. The fragrance of what Mary has done for Jesus is probably still with him just days later in the Upper Room, in the Garden of Gethsemane, in Pilate’s inquisition room, on the road to Golgotha. What Mary has done for Jesus stays with him in a sensory – a sensual – way for the rest of his life which is only another week.

Despite the flogging and the torture, the humiliation and sweat and tears, despite the taunting and the laughing, is it possible the aroma is still on his feet as the women weep at the foot of the cross – his feet eye level with them the feet that just a week earlier Mary had touched and perfumed and rubbed in her hair. Perhaps this Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, was one of those women that showed their love by staying there while their friend breathed his last breath. If so, perhaps Jesus could smell that same aroma of love that he had experienced those days before in Bethany. Maybe Mary smelled her fragrance still on these now battered feet.

These worn and tired feet now support the weight of his whole suspended body on the cross. And as we’ve been talking about, the body is in a full inhale now as he hangs there. This no longer looks like the same Jesus that Mary knew in that aroma filled room at her home. This Jesus is dying.

The love that Mary models for us is the love to which God calls all of us. Fully, completely, extravagantly love poured out for her friend without question and without fear.

Can we do the same? Love unconditionally, fully, extravagantly. Our Lenten journey calls us to that task so let us respond openly and completely. The aroma of love surrounds us.

Amen.