

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Lent

Sunday, March 13, 2016

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Death stinks.

I know this. Death really stinks. My Godmother Phyllis died on Monday. Her funeral was yesterday. I miss her and I really don't like knowing that I won't get another card from her, see her big smile, feel her warm embrace. She was my mom's best friend since they met in nursing school 56 years ago. I can't even imagine how many hours of my mom's life have been spent on the phone talking to Phyllis. We will be sad about her death for a long time.

Death stinks.

You know this. Death really stinks. Since I started my interim assignment here at Christ the King last October, I've already lost track of how many members of this congregation have passed away. Some of the first people to welcome me here and introduce themselves were George and Elva Kubera. I visited George just a couple weeks ago and just like they did when I first met them, they bragged about how they were about to celebrate their 70th wedding anniversary this month. George passed away last week and my heart absolutely breaks for Elva and her family. My heart has broken for this congregation so many times in the past few months. I will be sad for you for a long time.

Today's gospel talks of a dinner party, thrown in honor of Jesus who has raised Lazarus from the dead. But in just a few verses prior, we read how distraught Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, have become. Seemingly inconsolable, the text tells us that their weeping disturbs Jesus greatly and moves him. Jesus too is so overcome with grief that he began to weep too. The death of someone you love can certainly be one of the saddest experiences we living folks are forced to endure.

Death also stinks.

I know this. I'm married to a funeral director. Death stinks. Being around dead people is really smelly. Our bodies are pretty smelly even when we're still breathing and our hearts, lungs, kidneys and livers are still functioning. When these things stop working, things get smelly. In a hurry. Fortunately for all of us, funeral directors have just the right set of skills, many of which are focused on keeping things from getting stinky.

So death also stinks.

Jesus knew this. When Mary and Martha brought Jesus to Lazarus' tomb, they all prepared themselves for the stench that would come from the tomb when the stone was rolled away. Our Gospel writer doesn't describe the smell directly so we're left to our imaginations but I'm certain it was seriously stinky. I know. I'm married to a funeral director.

Nardostachys jatamansi, commonly known as "Spikenard," is a flowering plant of the Valerian family that grows in the Himalayas of Nepal, China, and India. The plant grows to about 1 meter (3 ft) in height and has pink, bell-shaped flowers. It is found in the altitude of about 3,000 to 5,000 m (9,800 to 16,400 ft). The underground stems can be crushed and distilled into an intensely aromatic amber-colored essential oil, which is very thick in consistency. Spikenard oil is used as a perfume, an incense, a sedative, and an herbal medicine said to fight insomnia, birth difficulties, and other minor ailments. (credit: Wikipedia)

Apparently, "Spikenard" or "Nard" oil is also really good at covering up the stink of death.

So why am I talking so much about death? Isn't the gospel I read earlier about a dinner party celebrating that Lazarus is no longer dead? Why is this former restaurant owner not taking advantage of this text to talk about mealtime celebrations and what a good hosts Martha and Mary are for their guests? Well actually, I would much rather talk about those things this morning. After all, who doesn't like a good dinner party story? I know I do. And I've got plenty of them.

But it's not my fault. Blame Mary. She's the one who interrupts the dinner party. She's the one who breaks open the jar of pure nard oil and pours it onto Jesus' feet. She's the one who scandalously and intimately rubs her hair on those same feet. She's the one who offends Judas with her overly extravagant and seemingly mis-guided gift. If we're not talking about a dinner party today, it's because now we're talking about Mary's outrageous act. Blame her.

Judas was right, 300 denarii is an awful lot of money. That's about equal to the entire year's wages of the average working man in Jesus' day. That was some seriously expensive perfume that Mary poured out onto Jesus' feet and wiped up with her hair.

I have to imagine that if I was seated at this dinner party with Jesus, Lazarus and the rest of the disciples, I might have been more than a little

upset if the pleasing aromas of a well-cooked meal and the delicate bouquet of good wine were suddenly over-powered by the strong scent of perfume. It's as if the party has suddenly been transported to the fragrance department at Macy's. I'm convinced that's one place one does not linger for very long without doing some sort of permanent damage to your olfactory senses.

Needless to say, Mary's act has considerably altered the setting for our celebration of Lazarus' new life. And even though we know he turns out to be trouble as the story continues, I have to say I'm sort of with Judas on this one. Maybe his outburst is sparked by the strength of the flowery odors now permeating the party room but his complaint doesn't really seem all that off base to me. A year's wages seems like an awful lot of money to waste on one pair of feet. Especially when those feet belong to the one who's always preaching about caring for the poor, feeding the hungry, and clothing the naked.

Yes, John our author, reminds us that Judas' motives are not to be trusted but does that really mean his complaint, my complaint, isn't still valid? The more I think about it, the more mad I become at this silly gesture of extravagance which comes off as foolish at best and ridiculously wasteful at worst. I hate to say it, but I'm going to stand with Judas on this one. And I'm a pastor.

That's where I was with this text a few weeks ago, when I started to look forward to preparing a message for today. It's the last Sunday of Lent and your pastor was preparing to take a stand with Judas. Right in the middle of the fragrance department of Macy's. Somehow I was in the wrong place standing beside the wrong person. That was last week.

Then, my Godmother Phyllis died on Monday. Her funeral was yesterday. I miss her. I always knew that she loved me. She sent me cards, she came to visit me, she kept track of me through my mom. Looking at it from a distance, there was nothing extravagant about her acts towards me yet her love was extravagant.

Mary knew exactly what she was doing when she brought out that jar of perfume. Like her sister had already done, it was time for Mary to help those closest to Jesus understand who he really was and what he was about to do. The Messiah means "anointed one" and Mary's extravagant anointing was in confirmation of the truth of who Jesus really was. Jesus came to be a savior, he had even saved Lazarus, and now he was preparing to save the rest of us too. Ritualizing the anointing of a savior could easily have been done with some of the olive oil used to prepare

the meal. Olive oil would have smelled nice and still reminded us that Jesus is the messiah.

But that's not the oil that Mary chose. Mary grabbed the nard, probably on hand because of Lazarus' recent state. Mary used the oil that's saved for those who die.

"You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Mary's extravagant gift does much more than shock our olfactory senses or offend our sensibilities. Mary's extravagant gift points us to the cross.

Jesus, our messiah, our anointed one, our savior, is headed to the cross. It's at the cross that we will come to know the full nature of God's love for us. It's at the cross we will come to know what it truly means to be given extravagant love. It's at the cross we smell the stinky sweetness of death.

Jesus knows what is to come and I suppose we do too. We have the book right here after all. And we re-read this part every year. Our Lenten journey is fast coming to an end. Though I've been down this road many times, I never seem to like this part. This year during Lent, we've explored the ways in which Jesus "shows us the way." I've felt pretty good about what we've discovered together. Somehow, that doesn't seem to make where we're headed any easier.

In our advance work together, I shared with the rest of the worship planning team that my goal for lent is to try and fall in love Jesus all over again. Why I do this to myself, I can't really say. Because I always set myself up for a really big fall as a result. Death is always hard. This week has proved that for me. I'm guessing you might agree. But here we are, about to gather again at the table with Jesus and his twelve. Lazarus is here too. Martha is busy serving and Mary joins the party.

"Show us the way," we ask again. Mary pours out her perfume. Jesus is anointed. We're disoriented by the extravagance and then we're re-oriented by that same extravagance. And now we're staring at a cross. It seems this 'way' we've been discovering together leads to a cross. I'll say it again. Death stinks. And I'm really glad it does.

Amen.