

BEING BETHANY

Sermon, April 7, 2019, 9:00 a.m.

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

Text: John 12:1-8, Ephesians 5:1-2

As you all know, Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but was reared some ninety miles north of there in the town of Nazareth. Once Jesus began preaching and teaching, though, He was constantly on the go and on the road. We know from Luke 4 that He had gone home to Nazareth once at the outset of His ministry, but the “home-town” crowd there only wound up threatening to throw him off a cliff. So, it appears Jesus stayed away from Nazareth and spent most of his time in other regions ... Capernaum, Samaria, Jerusalem, the outer regions of Galilee. Jesus apparently had one special place He liked to go, though, perhaps when He wanted the companionship of friends and the absence of crowds, and that was a home in the little town of Bethany, just two miles or so outside of Jerusalem. Jesus’ good friends there were three siblings ... Lazarus, Martha and Mary ... who were always keeping their home open for Him, always welcoming Him, always greeting Him and any disciples with Him with open arms and warm hospitality. After Jesus hometown of Nazareth had run him out on a rail, it appears Bethany was where He went to more or less be at home ... to be in a place where He was welcomed and loved, a place where He enjoyed a sense of safety and shelter, a place where He had nothing to fear or nothing to prove. Martha, Mary, and Lazarus were not part of the “official” twelve apostles Jesus had called; apparently, they were simply friends, part of a supportive “structure” Jesus leaned on throughout His ministry to perhaps buck Him up and buoy Him onward, and especially now, as He was approaching the roughest of waters in this climactic final week of His earthly life.

Just as a brief aside, let me ask a question (and don’t answer, at least not out loud): Do you have such a “place”? Where do you go ... physically, mentally, or spiritually ... to find the strength and support you need to travel through your days? Have you cultivated a “Bethany,” a place where you can rest and feel safe, a place where you can relax and be you with people who love you? Some of you are fortunate enough to have that at home, but I know the painful reality is that isn’t true for many ... sadly for some home isn’t a safe place, it isn’t a warm place, it isn’t a place where you have nothing to fear or prove, it isn’t a place where you feel loved for who you are. Some of you may find your Bethany at work, where who you are and all you are gifted to do is welcomed and encouraged and nurtured and appreciated. Some of you may have found your Bethany in this church. It has always been my dream and hope as a pastor that our church will cultivate and nurture this sense of being a Bethany ... we want to be a place **first and foremost** where Jesus would feel “at home,” AND we want to be a place where any of His followers may feel at home: a place where people are welcomed in the name of Jesus and loved, a place where we all can enjoy a sense of safety and shelter, a sense of a place where we have nothing to fear, nothing to prove, nothing to hide; a warm, nurturing place where we can find the strength and support we need to travel through our days.

John tells us it was six days before Passover, which would have been the night before Palm Sunday, that Jesus attended a dinner at His home away from home in Bethany. We are told Lazarus was at the dinner. You know the story of Lazarus; he had just been raised back to life (*see the previous chapter; John 11*). And now, Lazarus sits at table with Jesus, along with his sisters Martha and Mary. Lazarus isn’t given any lines in this narrative, he doesn’t really say anything, but I always wondered ... what he was thinking, what was going through his mind? I mean, what happened to him while he was dead? How did it feel? *‘I ... I’m sure I was dead, but here I am.’* Was he sitting there wondering if he was in heaven or on this earth? Maybe since he was sitting there at the table with Jesus, he couldn’t really tell if this was heaven or earth.

His sisters were just so grateful to have their brother back with them. Martha is doing what she does best, serving away. Then, at some point during the dinner, Mary gets up and walks over to Jesus, kneels, and taking a pint of very expensive perfume, pours it all out on Jesus feet ... and then wipes His feet dry using her hair. We are told the perfume was nard (or spikenard); at the time, spikenard could only be found in the Himalayas of northern India. We are told a pint of it cost three hundred denarii, which was about the average yearly salary of a laborer. Think about this in terms of your annual income, just poured out on Jesus’ feet.

There is humility in Mary's act of anointing as she stoops to wipe Jesus' feet with her hair, and also just a whiff of scandal, as commentators tell us it was most unusual for a woman of that culture to ever be seen with her hair down. But ... this was **Bethany**. Mary was in a private, safe space with family and friends who knew and loved her; she need not be concerned about appropriate social norms, snarky comments, judging eyes ... no, there shouldn't be any of that in our Bethany homes. She was simply offering an act of extravagant love and gratitude to Jesus in this home where demonstrable acts of extravagant love were more than likely not uncommon (*I know that's a double negative, but it works*). She was tending to Jesus, the best she knew how. She was tending to Jesus, who she knew as her friend. She was tending to Jesus, Who she believed was the Son of God. She was tending to Jesus, Who had restored her brother to life. She was tending to Jesus, Who I'm sure she somehow intuitively anticipated was about to endure a horrific weeklong ordeal of betrayal, humiliation, pain and death.

Mary was doing what I like to call "*giving flowers to the living*." Too often we wait until someone has died before we send flowers; well, they really won't be able to enjoy them, then! Let Mary's extravagant act of love toward Jesus remind us to take time to give flowers to the *living*; to intentionally take time and effort to show expressions of love to the ones who are close to us *while we can*, to express our gratitude in large ways and small, even if it seems almost inappropriate because of all that needs to be done "out there." It is so common for us to spend our energy and time trying to fix what's wrong "out there", to worry about The Big Things, and in the process forget to tend to the loving relationships in our lives while we have time and opportunity to do so!

Note too, that Mary's uninhibited act of lavish love and generous kindness did not end at Jesus' feet! The fragrance of her act of devotion and gratitude affected everyone in that Bethany home. John tells us, "*The house was FILLED with the fragrance of the perfume*." When we practice acts of love, when we "*give flowers to the living*" in our Bethanys, the effect can be enormous! It can fill and affect everyone in the whole household! The effect can fill a whole church! The effect can fill a whole neighborhood! The effect can fill a whole city; it can even affect a whole world. It can even go on to affect the lives of the poor whom Judas seemed so concerned about! Aromas of love arising out of our "Bethanys" as we "give flowers to the living" to those near and dear really can go on to change the Big Things ... like a beautiful fragrance, it gently begins to spread, to grow, and to transform the way things are.

So, just prior to the momentous events of Holy Week, Jesus was anointed with a fragrant ointment, and in all likelihood, the lingering aroma of this precious act of devotion and love lasted throughout this most difficult week to come ... this aroma lingered with Him and perhaps even served to comfort Him throughout the terrible physical pain, psychological torture, and severe isolation He was about to endure. The aromatic offering of a sincere, dearly devoted friend clung to Him throughout His ordeal, and no doubt gave Him *fragrant* wisps of comfort amidst the *flagrant* stench of betrayal, treachery and death. As Jesus would smell the aroma, it would trigger the loving memory of a warm home, of the selfless, extravagant devotion of a dear friend, and I believe would encourage Him on as He would endure what was necessary for the salvation of that dear woman and of all of us. In fact, I bet Jesus came out of the tomb on the third day with traces of the fragrance still clinging to Him, this reminder of His Bethany home and a grateful friend's devotion.

On Easter Sunday this sanctuary will be filled with the fragrance of Easter lilies and spring flowers (*I know that's hard for those of you with allergies; sorry, you'll have to deal with it*), the fragrance of life, the fragrance that reminds us the hope of life springing eternal. Fragrance that reminds us the Messiah has indeed fought the fight and won the battle; the fragrant aroma of life that overcomes the flagrant stench of death and sin. Fittingly, the flowers are also memorials to our loved ones who left us with the lingering fragrance of so many fond memories as they departed their earthly homes and experienced their resurrection. Most of all, the fragrance reminds us of Christ who loved us and "*... gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and pleasing sacrifice to God*." A fragrance that calls us, also, to gratefully offer our lives and our love as fragrant offerings, pleasing to God, as we love each other just as He loved us ... right here in our Bethanys.