

Message for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year C (4/3/2022)
John 12:1-8

Although Judas is a prime candidate for condemnation, I hesitate to dismiss his objection in today's Gospel too quickly. In response to Mary of Bethany's costly anointing of Jesus at the dinner table, he asks, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" The Gospel writer of John informs us parenthetically that Judas' motives are not pure; he's not interested in caring for the poor, but only maximizing what he might steal from the common purse. Even so, Judas' character flaw doesn't necessarily invalidate his question: *What is the best use of a treasure like this pricey perfume? Shouldn't we utilize our resources first and foremost to bring good news to the poor? Don't we have more important long-term priorities than this extravagant, and might I add, purely symbolic action?*

These aren't unreasonable considerations. If we're concerned with stewardship, that is, with the wise management of God's gifts, then we can't ignore critiques like the one Judas offers. The way we use any resource matters, so careful discernment is in order. And by grace, over time we may learn to strike a faithful balance between loving generously and personally in any given moment and looking to the wider needs of our community and the world.

Judas' question in today's Gospel reflects a decidedly utilitarian approach to discipleship, asking how God can get the biggest bang for God's buck, and how

we can be involved in achieving that outcome. But, Mary of Bethany's outpouring of love for Jesus flies in the face of such logic. Kneeling at the feet of her lord and friend, she doesn't count the cost, but fills the house where the disciples are staying with the fragrance of her devotion, forever capturing the moment in the memory of every speechless onlooker.

And, Jesus receives Mary's gesture of devotion with grace. He doesn't object to the temporary extravagance of Mary's gift, but declares it appropriate in the moment.¹ Why? "You always have the poor with you," he says, "but you do not always have me." You see, Mary's anointing at table is an anointing for burial; unlike Peter and others like him, Mary acknowledges Jesus' impending death, and the quality of her love reflects that awareness. The simple fact is that Jesus doesn't have the luxury of time, so Mary can't afford to dole out her devotion in reasonable quantities. Either she will love Jesus generously, or she won't.² And, the time is now.

In view of death, in other words, Mary's extravagance makes more sense. Maybe you've had the experience of accompanying a loved one in their last days. In view of death, suddenly every moment carries the weight of a lifetime; every memory, every shred of wisdom, every hope and fear is charged with meaning, and every gesture of compassion and care makes a difference. The time leading

¹ William G. Carter, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2, 142.

² Ibid. 144.

up to death is a holy time – a time to tell the truth, to make peace, if possible, to express love. In any case, it's not a time to hold back.

Kate Bowler was diagnosed with stage IV colon cancer at age thirty-five. As you'd expect, her illness has colored every aspect of her life in the years since, compelling her to reconsider her relationships, her faith, her approach to time. Thank God she's a gifted writer and motivated to share her experience with the rest of us. As Bowler describes in the following excerpts of her book, *No Cure for Being Human*, a heightened awareness of her own mortality has taught her to cherish the present: [excerpts from pp.83-5].

If “the future is a cliff,” as Bowler puts it, then “all I have is now.”³

Six days before the Passover, Jesus' future is a cliff, and Mary of Bethany faces that fact head on. She lays claim to the gift of now; she insists on being alive with Jesus until he is not. Hence the breathtaking scene that unfolds at dinner. Mary has no need to speak because her actions dramatize what words cannot express⁴: an abundant, even wasteful love, the kind of love that refuses to exercise discretion in view of death, and will sustain her even after death has done its worst.

Friends, that same love also gives us permission to face death with honesty and grace. Although our culture denies death at every turn, as people on the way to the cross with Jesus, we accept the reality of death, even if we refuse to allow

³ Ibid. 77, 76.

⁴ Jae Won Lee, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2, 145.

death to have the last word. As people on the way to the cross with Jesus, we cling to the hope that love will have the last word, that love is doing a new thing among us even in view of death. So, like Mary, we love generously, not always counting the cost, and we trust that the fragrance of our love will fill the house until Love incarnate comes again to stay.