

RUNNYMEDE UNITED CHURCH  
March 21, 2010, the Fifth Sunday in Lent  
*"The Fragrance of Love"*  
John 12: 1-8

The story of the woman anointing Jesus appears in all four gospels. Mark gives her no name, but Jesus says of her that "wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her." So it has been, until like a piece of carbon polished into a diamond, its facets refract light in every direction.

Six days before Passover, in John's account, just before Jesus entered Jerusalem, the woman named Mary of Bethany, during an intimate dinner with friends, brings out an exquisite jar with costly contents, emptying the nard inside over Jesus' feet, massaging and, scandalously, loosening long waves of hair to wipe them. Imagine exotic fragrance filling the house, as if a litre of magnolia-scented oil had been splashed into a tub.

What strikes you most forcefully? The rich fragrance, sweet and rare? Or the angry indignation of onlookers?

There they were, Jesus' followers, at the beginning of the week we now call 'holy'. They've spent three years with him. They know him. They know tension is growing, though even they cannot anticipate the abrupt oscillations ahead: the shouts of "Hosanna" turning to "Crucify", the palms and the nails, the crown and the cross to come.

And there's Judas. It's hard to be objective about Judas, at whose name the word "traitor" shudders through the centuries and thirty pieces of silver clank in our memories. John's gospel describes him, with hindsight, as a hypocritical thief. But in the story we've just read, his words are sensible, aren't they? "Why all this waste? What a smell. A drop would have been enough. It's crazy. Think of the poor. The ointment could have been sold; think of the bread one could buy with that much gold."

Judas was right. Nard, a fragrant oil derived from a plant growing in India's northern mountains, was imported at immense cost: a pound was worth the 300 denarii Judas quoted. With a day's wage pegged at one denarius, a pound of nard was worth a year's salary.

Don't we understand Judas? Why didn't Mary just use a drop and sell – or give away - the rest? Sister of Lazarus and Martha, Jesus' friends, she who sat at his feet, mulling over every teaching, surely she knew that Jesus came to serve the outcast, the leper, the poor.

But Jesus spoke: "Leave her alone. She has done a beautiful thing for me."

Often, we do not appreciate the most significant people in our lives until they're gone. Then we realize how a friend, a teacher, a parent called forth some special dimension of who we are, helped us see the world with new eyes. We say: "I'll never be the same", but it's too late for anything else. Not for Mary.

Anointing can seem unusual: we anoint babies and adults at baptism but The Dictionary of

Sacramental Worship devotes nine pages to anointing, a surprise to us Protestants who barely know the difference between nard and lard. In Jesus' day, anointing was a way to mark rulers, prophets, priests, furniture, buildings: guests had head or feet anointed. The sick were anointed, and the dying. It was the custom to anoint the dead, to break flasks of fragrant oil over them, the broken pieces buried with the body. Such anointing was the loving work of women. Within a few days we will hear how women go to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body.

But Mary's intuition directs her to offer such devotion now. Why? What was she feeling? Overwhelming gratitude? Probably. Jesus had restored life to her brother, Lazarus. Deep fear? Yes. She must have heard rumours about the threat to the powerful posed by this teacher from Nazareth, a threat compounded by stories of the raising of Lazarus. Perhaps this woman who had sat at Jesus' feet realized that anointing with oil was a sign not only of priesthood but of prophetic power. Her heart tells her to offer a lavish gift without considering cost. What is socially unacceptable behaviour becomes an act of faith - which Jesus welcomes.

Mary probably **hadn't** thought it all through. Some stories have the oil anointing Jesus' head; here it is his feet. Perhaps, in haste, aware of indignant eyes, Mary splashed oil everywhere, without calculating cost. Certainly, Mary's impulsive gift would never get through the budget process of any business - or any church. Judas is more in line with the opinion of his day, and ours, than Mary.

But, as perfume permeated the streets of Bethany, Jesus accepted Mary for all she was, all she was trying to do, and said, "Leave her alone. You will always have the poor among you. You will not always have me."

Mary responds to the beauty, the mystery, of Jesus' presence with an act of unabashed praise. Such is the fragrance of love.

What do we learn from this woman? How do we remember her?

Picture yourself as Mary, seeking your most costly treasure. Reach for the luminous creamy jar, cool as marble, with curved handles, tapered neck. What is within that jar, for you? What is the fragrance of your love? Is it time? Is it sensitivity to suffering, openness to others? Is it caring? Is it a gift of music or commitment to the earth? Does not each one of us have a costly fragrant oil that we might pour out at the feet of Jesus this Lent?

Many abuse Jesus' words: "The poor are always with you" (John 12:8), like politicians quoting them to defend spending cuts on social programmes, making persistent poverty part of a divinely orchestrated plan. But Jesus rejects Judas' attempt to make life an *Either/Or* proposition. The point is not to serve the poor OR to offer a gift of love. God needs both. God needs us to offer gifts to those suffering from HIV/AIDS in Kenya, to those who come to the Community meal, to those reaching out to young people in remote native and affluent urban communities, when life seems pointless.

But God needs us also to love each other. A family, a church, a school, a business that organizes itself well, gets all its work done and finds time to serve others is still likely to wither if it cannot also express its love and encourage its members. Singing our praise in love,

reaching out in openness and dialogue, pouring out our oil, serving the poor - all are ways to love God. We cannot separate them.

If there is a congregation with great potential both for involvement in God's world and for reaching out to extend care to members and community, it is this one. As our Lenten journey brings us close to Holy Week, it's fitting to ask how you can best pour out the fragrance of your love. In the next few months, as you set priorities for ministry and explore Runnymede's future, may the sweet fragrance of worship and the strong aroma of commitment to the poor and broken continue to waft through this community; may you find ways both to love and to serve the one who is with all who weep, hunger, thirst.

Soon Jesus will leave Bethany. The parade is waiting, with its loud hosannas. Golgotha looms; soon Mary will stand by as nails pound, helpless, except in the love she has poured out.

Wherever instruments of oppression multiply, wherever human bodies stretch out in pain, wherever people reject others, wherever the earth cries out, she stands by, ready to act in love, while he dies all over again. "She has done a beautiful thing," says Jesus. As we near the end of our Lenten journey, in the name of the one who spilled his life across our aching earth, let us bring the jars of our lives and risk giving the gift of love.

A thought: next Saturday, people around the world will give an hour of light to observe Earth Hour. The movement is growing. Like Mary with her oil, committing to that hour is a symbol of care: an anointing. Perhaps we need that kind of ritual, to make the point in the extravagant abundance of darkness moving around the planet: despite failures, like Copenhagen, the hour has come as never before to care for the earth, to die to old ways that new life might be born. Can we offer the fragrance of love, the gift of that care, to others, to the world God loves? Amen.