

**“This is Us”**  
The Fifth Sunday in Lent, 2019  
*John 12:1-8*

**There was a place called Bethany.** And like Boring, Oregon or Greasy, Oklahoma or Cranky Corner, Louisiana -- real places -- this town told on itself.

First of all, it was a house of something or other. The *Beth* in Bethany gave away that much. There was Bethel, house of God and Bethsaida, house of fish and Bethlehem, house of bread, and Bethany: house of the afflicted.

Maybe there's nothing to it or maybe ancient Bethany was a place of care for the poor and the sick.

Simon the Leper lived *in Bethany*.<sup>1</sup> That's according to Mark's gospel. And in John's account, Jesus is asked to come to the aid of a man who lay dying *in Bethany*.<sup>2</sup>

Our text takes us there, to the side of a mountain on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Before entering the holy city on the back of a colt, Jesus comes to House of the Afflicted. It's the Saturday before Good Friday. And he's in *Bethany*.

Mary and her sister Martha and their brother Lazarus live there and John has already let us know of special connection. Back in Chapter 11, when Lazarus was in trouble, they had said, “Lord, the one you love is sick.”<sup>3</sup> The connection between their household and Jesus is love.

We are in Chapter 12, where Lazarus is no longer dead. He's up and eating, as a matter of fact. Martha is *\*still\** serving -- bless her -- and Mary has her heart set on being at the feet of Jesus. They are celebrating the gift of life. They are together the way that we get together, when it's the weekend, and someone's been planning for days and cooking for hours.

At some point, Mary makes her move. She has an expensive vial of ointment in her hands -- an oil so rare and so pure, no one in Bethany can afford it -- and before anyone can wrap their minds around what exactly is happening, she has broken it open, Jesus's feet are drenched.

She rubs it in and when his skin can't absorb any more, she removes the excess with her hair. *Like* it's appropriate -- *like* no one is watching.

Oh, but they are. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus are hosting Jesus and his followers; at least some of them. Judas Iscariot is in the house and he loses it. This woman has waltzed over and poured out a stupid amount of a precious substance on Jesus' feet. *For what?* “Why wasn't this oil sold and the money give to the poor?” he wants to know.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 14:3–10

<sup>2</sup> John 11:1–12:11

<sup>3</sup> John 11:3.

And this is where we Christians dive into the differences between Mary and Judas. We strike the contrast between Mary and Judas's character, between Mary and Judas's contributions. We highlight which one is pleasing to Jesus and then we tell ourselves to do better (or imagine the faces of the people who we sure hope are listening).

That interpretive path has something to offer. A good long look at what is wrong with Judas's objection could be the thing that nudges us to examine ourselves. Judas misrepresents the content of his heart and so do we. *I definitely* need to recall the costliness of Mary's offering. She gives against the grain and she does it for love -- two things that I am more likely to tell myself that I am doing...rather than actually do.

Another approach to the passage before us, is to recognize the \*yet another\* mention of death. With all the death talk in John's gospel -- in all 4 of the gospels, for that matter -- God *could be* trying to tell us something... something about death or something about intimacy. What Mary does for Jesus is an intimate thing. The church could stand to talk about both these subject (perhaps at the same time).

That's three or four sermons, right there. I haven't even gotten to Jesus saying the thing about the poor always being with us.

[For the record, he's saying that as long as there are poor people, they'll be with us; as in, we'll have their back.<sup>4</sup> We do not have to neglect them to do for Jesus what Mary has just done.]

But this year -- this time, in front of John 12:1-8 -- I feel led to zoom out. I come back to this being a story about a place called Bethany, and to a sense that the good news is situated in the setting.

At the beginning of holy week, we find Jesus in a household where there is devotion and dissent, Sabbath rest and ministry imagining, active service and relaxed fellowship, a celebration of life and preparations for the grave. All of this, in one house.

Under one roof, there is a place for Lazarus bearing witness to new life, *while* Jesus names the importance the day of his burial. There is a place for disciples betraying their Lord *and* for disciples trying to honor him. In one house, under one roof, hard questions are asked, motives are questioned, piety and poverty are topics of conversation.

Friends, this is us. This is the household of God.

In a matter of days, empire and religion will team up to execute him. Jesus could be anywhere. *Jesus is in Bethany*. He has chosen the House of the Afflicted. Or maybe that is the house that has chosen him.

The masses have gone ahead of him to break off their palm branches and to practice their Hosannas. Jesus is at the home of his dear friends. And because he makes this stop, we are given a glimpse of

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<sup>4</sup> So we can afford to do for Jesus what Mary has just done. We can be and do both.

ourselves as we are and as we might be.

We are those who gather in the name of the one who came in through Bethlehem and is going out through Bethany....In through the House of Bread and out through the House of Affliction.

We who went and adored him at the manger, now sit at the table with the sick and the poor. We who have known our faith to be the bread of life, now visit the place where the leper can live and the dead can live again. We who received the gift of God in the form of a baby, now have our hearts broken open to receive the gift of God in the form of a suffering servant.

Holy week begins in Bethany. Then, and now.

The One who turned water into wine -- good wine -- gathers us together. In one house, under one roof, we will keep the feast of love and gratitude, and offer it to Jesus as a sign of our devotion. He will take our poverty and our afflictions, our disagreements and not-so-pure motives, our sin and our inability to get out from underneath the weight of death, and he will bless it. Jesus will turn us into a healing oil poured out for the wounds of our world.

It will be costly, but he will do it.

—*Rachel G. May* © 2019