



FILLED WITH THE FRAGRANCE OF THE PERFUME

Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

The day of Jesus' death fast approached. He returned to the village of Bethany just a few miles from Jerusalem where he will die. Bethany is home to Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha.

The Stench of Death

Bethany was the site of the most wonderful miracle Jesus ever performed -- the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Jesus had arrived too late to heal Lazarus and Lazarus had died. Immediately upon arriving Jesus asked to visit Lazarus' tomb, a cave with a stone lying against it. Jesus called for the stone to be taken away. But Martha said, "Lord, already there's a stench because he's been dead four days." Jesus calmly assured her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you'd see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone despite the stench of death. And Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" And the dead man came out alive.

The world today, as then, is filled with the stench of death. Another student was shot and killed in Gary, Indiana last week. Yesterday the newspaper headlines blared, "Six Palestinians killed in protests." In Aspen, Colorado a jet crashed into the side of a mountain killing the young people aboard. The world is filled with the stench of death and Jesus *hates* that smell. By his death and resurrection, Jesus dispels the stench of death throughout the world and in our own hearts.

The Scent of Service

So Jesus returned to Bethany, the site of his greatest miracle. He counted Lazarus and his two sisters among his closest friends. They prepared a great dinner in his honor. Martha served the dinner, probably after having spent all morning in the kitchen preparing the meal by herself. Martha was used to doing all the kitchen work by herself. She didn't ask nor did she expect her brother or sister to help her. She often resented their insensitivity, but she also knew they couldn't cook or serve like she could. She wanted everything just right -- the formal table setting with cloth napkins, polished silver, the best china. Lazarus and Mary don't care about how everything looks -- they'd be happy with hot-dogs on paper plates. But Martha loves to serve so she does what she does best.

When all are seated she brings in the tomato juice appetizer and invites Jesus to taste it. She proudly comments on how she made it from her own home grown tomatoes. When they've finished the appetizers she brings out a large hot plate heaped with roast lamb and mint jelly. She returns to the kitchen for the string bean casserole, and back again for the mashed potatoes, gravy, and fresh baked bread. The wonderful smell of roast lamb and bread fills the room and makes everybody's mouth water *reminding us that Jesus has come, not only to dispel the stench of death but to celebrate life in all its fullness*. The fragrance of that meal filling the room reminds us of the love we express to Jesus whenever we serve him. There are many ways to serve Jesus – like the men and women who prepare the Lenten Luncheons, and Wednesday Word meals and take Meals on Wheels to shut-ins. But there are so many other ways we fill the world with the fragrance of serving Christ in practical ways.

The Fragrance of Worship

While Martha serves Jesus, Mary sits at the table asking questions, making comments and listening. Then she quietly excuses herself while Jesus, Lazarus and the apostles continue their conversation. She disappears into her bedroom. Minutes later Mary returns to the table gently cradling, like a little baby, an alabaster flask of costly perfume containing a pound of pure nard. Pure! Not diluted! A pound! Not just a couple of ounces. Nard is the fragrant oil from the roots of an exotic perennial plant native to northern India. We're talking about expensive, imported perfume, not cheap Dollar Store stuff. How expensive? You could sell it for 300 denarii. A denarius was a day's wage. So the perfume was worth a whole year's salary! Mary must have saved what little money she had for years – perhaps a lifetime -- in order to buy the perfume. In biblical times nard was imported in sealed alabaster flasks – in other words, bottles made out of soft gypsum stone which couldn't be opened without destroying the bottle.

She asks Jesus to push back his chair from the table. Jesus looks a little puzzled but does what she asks. Everyone in the room watches her in shocked silence – probably also in embarrassment. She does four remarkable things. First, she loosens her long hair as Palestinian women still do when they grieve the death of a loved one. Then she pours the perfume on Jesus' feet - the whole pound of perfume. The smell of spikenard

fills the room -- a sharp scent somewhere between mint and ginseng. Then she touches him, a single-woman caressing the feet of a rabbi- something simply not done, unless anointing a body for burial. Then she wipes the perfume off again with her hair. Everybody has been rejoicing, happy, eating, drinking, celebrating and in comes Mary to worshipfully and lovingly prepare the body of Jesus for burial.

Judas sharply criticizes the waste. But love is a spendthrift. Think of the crazy things we do for people we love. We buy diamond rings costing thousands of dollars. We make reservations for Caribbean cruises. We buy expensive perfume and cologne for the love of our lives. It's simply not enough for people who love one another to serve one another. Think of Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*. He asks his wife if she loves him. She responds, "Well, I wash your clothes and cook your meals." "But do you love me?" Love demands something more than just good works and laborious service. And we, as Christians, know as well as Judas that the world is filled with hunger and poverty and we do what we can to serve the Lord through our service. But Christ says, "I know you people do a lot of good things for me and you should and I deeply appreciate all that you do -- but do you love me? Do you really love me?"

When we come to worship, we pour out on Jesus just a little of our love for him. We *serve Christ* in the world -- as Martha did. But worship really is the primary way we *express our love for Jesus*. The church *must* serve Jesus by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, healing the sick and preaching the gospel. But when we come together as Christ's family to hear his word, to pray, to sing his praises we pour out our love for him. We can run ragged doing social work, serving Jesus, doing good things in the world and in the church. And I thank God for all those people, regardless of their religion who serve Christ in the world, often serving Christ without being aware that they're his servants. But worship is central for Christians. Service, divorced from worship, leads either to insufferable self-righteousness or worn-out despair. Our Christian commitment to the poor is rooted in our love for Jesus. In our corporate worship we set apart a small portion of time each week to express our love for God who has come to us in Jesus Christ. Worship becomes one of our highest priorities as our love for Jesus grows. In worship we're transformed and renewed, equipped and sent to serve God's reign in the world.

Mary poured out the perfume on the feet of Jesus. For a moment the sweet, rare fragrance filled the room, then it was gone. For a few moments each week this sanctuary is filled with the fragrance of love for Jesus as we worship him. Then we leave. The sanctuary grows silent as we leave to serve Christ in the world.

Turn in your hymnals to hymn 391. Take the next few minutes to quietly read the hymn as a prayer to Jesus. Now I invite you to pray in unison the last stanza --

Take my love; my Lord, I pour
At Thy feet its treasure store.
Take myself, and I will be
Ever, only, all for Thee,
Ever, only, all for Thee.