

Love and Danger

Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

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John 12:1-11

The village of Bethany lay a few miles from Jerusalem. There Jesus wept over his friend Lazarus, who had died. There Jesus called Lazarus out of his tomb alive. And thereafter Jesus' enemies plotted against him with new intensity.

Six days before Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. They gave a dinner for him there, with Martha serving and Lazarus among those at the table with him.

Now Mary took a pound of perfumed ointment — made with real spikenard, very expensive — and she anointed Jesus' feet. Then she dried his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment.

But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was going to betray him), said, "Why wasn't this ointment sold for a year's wages and [the money] given to the poor?" (He said this, not out of concern for the poor, but because he was a thief and, being in charge of the money-box, he would steal what was put into it.)

But Jesus said, "Leave her alone! Let her keep it for when I'm buried. You always have the poor among you, but you don't always have me."

Now a big crowd of Jews learned that he was there. And they came, not only because of Jesus, but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests decided to kill Lazarus, too, since because of him many Jews were going off and putting faith in Jesus.

Children's Story

The Bible has lots of stories in it. And it has lots of commands. The commands say, "Make sure you do this. And make sure you don't do that." Some of the commands are ordinary. And some of the commands are surprising, like this one.

God said to the people Israel, "Every year take one tenth of everything that your hard work accomplishes, and set it aside." That's interesting. But it's not surprising, not yet.

Then God says, "I want you to store all of it up, the grain and the livestock and the wine and the oil — store all of it up for the Levites, the people who serve me in my temple." That's not so surprising. The Levites had to get food from somewhere.

But this part, this part is surprising. "Store up everything for the priests and the Levites," God says. But that's only for one year out of three. For the other two years, God says, "Use it all to have a big party."

That's a surprise! Aren't there better things to do with all that grain and livestock and wine and oil? Aren't there hungry people to feed? Aren't there people to put to work? But to have a party?! What a waste!

Oh, there is one more thing. God says, "Have the party at my place." Maybe it's not a waste if you're celebrating how good God is. Maybe it's not a waste if you trust God to give you everything you need.

Sermon

Nobody saw it coming. How could they? Lazarus was dead, dead beyond doubt. Four days now he had been in his tomb. Long enough for the irreversible processes of death to make their mark. This was why they had anointed his body for burial, smearing his lifeless flesh with perfumed ointments to cover up the scent and then the stench of death, at least for a little while.

But Jesus had ordered the stone to be taken away from the mouth of the tomb. After four days, though, the fragrance of the ointment would have lost its battle with the smell of death. No one wanted to face that. But Jesus had insisted, so they took the stone away. And when Jesus called to Lazarus, they all saw the dead man come walking — shuffling, actually, because of the tightly wound burial clothes — out of the tomb, out of death. Nobody saw that coming. How could they?

It was a dangerous time for Jesus and a dangerous place. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, the city that would be the death of him. It was the city of his main antagonists, the chief priests and the Pharisees. The last thing they wanted, the last thing they needed, was a broad-based, popular religious movement to rival their authority, a religious movement to catch the attention of the Romans, a populist groundswell that would prompt the Romans to take more aggressive action, action that would upset the delicate but workable status quo, the status quo they had turned to their advantage and come to depend on.

And now, a scant few miles from Jerusalem, in Bethany, Jesus had done the unthinkable. Dead-as-could-be Lazarus was alive for everyone to see. And in large numbers people were turning to Jesus in faith. So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a special meeting, and they decided the time had come for Jesus to die.

Six days before Passover, Jesus returned to their backyard, to Bethany. He was heading straight for disaster.

But first there was a party. Who gave the party, John doesn't say. Probably the whole village, because they all knew Lazarus and his story. Lazarus was at the head table, along with Jesus, the guest of honor. Martha . . . of course, Martha was serving. She was always busy, Martha was, always doing her duty. And Mary?

We don't see Mary at first. She's not busy planning the party. She's not busy in the kitchen. She's not busy serving the honored guests. No, Mary has her own thing going on. Mary has heart. Mary has eyes. Mary has a mind on fire. Her passion is for Jesus, for his person, for his words, for his spirit. She has listened. She has watched. She has heard. She has seen. She sees what's coming, and she plans to do something about it, to do what she can. Jesus is on his way to die. He has said it. Mary has seen it. She knows it. So she takes action, an action no one saw coming.

In the middle of the celebration, Mary prepared Jesus for his burial. Yes, she's getting ahead of things. Jesus is not dead yet. The ointment isn't necessary. But events will unfold at breakneck speed. Jesus will be taken away. And who knows if his loved one will have any chance to give him a proper burial? So six days before Passover, Mary pours out her ointment on Jesus' feet. And, in an act of I-don't-care-who's-watching love, she takes down her hair and dries Jesus' feet with it.

And the house fills up with the fragrance of the ointment. The fragrance that tries to keep the smell of death at bay. The fragrance that always, ultimately fails. The fragrance that will fail this time, too — unless by some miracle Jesus' body would be spared the decay of death.

No one saw it coming, what Mary did. No doubt they hardly knew what to make of it. No doubt they were struck speechless, because nobody said a word. Well, almost nobody.

Judas the bean counter had his calculator out. He sized things up right away. He knew the cost of spikenard ointments, and they did not come cheap. This little display of Mary's had cost a year's wages. That's what Judas' calculator told him. Certainly there were better uses for that kind of money. Think of the poor! Think of the hungry! Think of the homeless! How many men, how many women, how many young children a year's wages could have helped! But it's all gone! And for what?!

Jesus' answer to Judas is among his most famous. "You always have the poor among you, but you don't always have me." It's not a question of ignoring the poor. It's a question of recognizing what time it is, of recognizing how much time — how little time — is left and of responding to that in a fit way. Beyond everyone else, Mary has recognized the time, how late it's getting. And she has responded.

Mary's response is made without calculation. Judas takes out his calculator to take measure of the situation. (Never mind the editorial comment about Judas being a thief. Take him at his word. That's what Jesus does.) Judas has calculated that the potential benefit to the poor outweighs the significance of Mary's act. For Judas, the cost of discipleship is determined through a cost-benefit analysis. If you're going to sacrifice, be sure to get the most bang for your sacrificial buck.

Mary, on the other hand, doesn't calculate at all. In his gospel, Luke tells a story about busy-in-the-kitchen Martha complaining about Mary. Mary was sitting at Jesus' feet, listening to him, instead of helping

in the kitchen, and Martha didn't like that. But Jesus took Mary's side, saying that Mary was focusing on what really mattered. Here in John's story, Mary is once again focusing on what really matters.

What really matters is Jesus and his impending death. And out of love for Jesus, Mary can think of only one thing to do. She doesn't calculate. She doesn't measure. She doesn't balance. She takes it all and pours it all over Jesus. Then she lets down her hair and pours herself all over him, too. This is not a time for half-measures. This is not a time to be concerned about reputations and repercussions. This is a time for love that is not measured out, but given in full.

Mary, you see, is a model disciple. Mary's act of devotion toward Jesus foreshadows his own act of devotion toward his disciples. In the next chapter of this gospel, it's Jesus on his knees before his disciples. He washes their feet. He dries off their feet. It's an act of love, an act of humble, selfless devotion. Jesus does it for his disciples. And he instructs his disciples to do it for one another. But first Mary had done it for him.

And Mary's utter lack of calculation foreshadows Jesus' own ultimate act of love. When he offers himself on the cross, Jesus is not carefully measuring out his love. He is giving his love in full. The cross is an icon of love and devotion. Not love and devotion given out in careful doses, but love and devotion given in full, without regard to cost, without regard to benefit, the only determination being that the time has come for such love and devotion.

Now I am just about finished and I haven't gotten to the "danger" part of my sermon title: "Love and Danger." The danger part would have been about Lazarus, now himself under the threat of death, and all because Jesus had given him new life.

I wonder if that's a parable of everyone to whom Jesus gives new life. Scripture says that in Christ we have been born all over again, that in Christ we move from death to life. For Lazarus that was a dangerous position to be in, living new life that had obviously come from Jesus. Perhaps if our new life in Christ was as obvious, we would be in some danger ourselves.

And perhaps our new life would be obvious, were we to love Jesus the way Mary did. A way that led her to do something outlandish and extravagant, never once counting the cost. A way that led her to be very much like the one she loved.