

Lent 5, Year C, 031713

*Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.*

Do you know the story by the famous American short-story writer O. Henry that's called 'The Gift of the Magi?' Even if you haven't, you've probably heard the story line in one form or another because it's one of those tales that's been retold in every way possible, including all Lifetime Movies except the ones about kidnapped daughters or missing husbands with amnesia. Those have a different plot.

The original story concerns a young couple called Della and Jim. These two are described as extremely poor but very much in love. Their poverty meant they owned practically nothing, except that each had a unique possession. For Della, that was her hair, which was her glory. We're told that when she let it down it almost served as a robe. Jim's one possession was his gold watch which had been handed on to him by his father, and in which he took great pride.

It was the day before Christmas, and Della had just one dollar and eighty-seven cents to buy Jim a present. She went out and sold her hair for twenty dollars; and with the money she bought an ornate watch chain for Jim's precious pocket watch. When Jim came home that night and saw Della's cropped hair, he stopped, as if stupefied. It wasn't that he didn't like how she looked or that he loved her less; in his eyes she was as lovely as ever. No, there was something else. Slowly he handed her his Christmas gift; it was a set of expensive tortoise-shell combs with jewelled edges for her hair - and he had sold his pocket watch to buy them.

Sentimental? Well, maybe. But love is like that, I think. At least when we read it in middle school, it was what we wanted to read - so loving and so sad all at the same time! We recognized what O. Henry was writing about. That's the reason, surely, for the many variations of the story. Love is extravagant. At least, we wish it to be so. Our ideals tell us love is always giving. Love's like that. It is, in a way, tangible. In fact, if you think about it, sometimes love has a 'smell' about it - it fills the atmosphere around us.

I remember once telling my high school best friend's mother that she smelled like my grandmother. She said, "Do you mean you think I smell old?" I did not mean that at all. It was the smell of a person that I loved. And it made me think of my grandmother's love.

As John's gospel says of the costly perfume with which Jesus was anointed, 'The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.' This is one of only a few stories that all four Gospel writers use, but the detail varies between them. It is simply not possible to figure out which of these accounts is the most accurate, so I am not going to tell you all the differences. You can look them up, if you want to. But the fact that they all included this story means it must have been really important to them. So the question we need to ask of John's account is: based on the way he tells the story, what does he want us to know about being a disciple of Jesus?

Several things stand out in John's version:

Footwashing was common enough - among the wealthy, anyway. The streets of the day were little more than open sewers, and reclining to eat, which was customary, meant that someone else's feet were rather too close to your face. Footwashing was essential to a pleasant meal. But in this story it wasn't the footwashing by itself that was strange, but how it was done.

Footwashing wasn't something that a host would do. This was the work of a slave or servant. Then why did Mary, the sister of Lazarus do it? It was something beneath even her position as a woman. And she would have broken taboos by letting her hair down to do it. Israelite women just didn't do that. A woman's hair was never unbound in public; indeed, a truly modest woman would have been reluctant to allow her hair to be seen loose even in her own home. And she used very expensive ointment when plain water was the order of the day. Such an extraordinary action could only have been prompted by the most profound love and loyalty. So it was not the stench of walking filthy streets that filled the room, but the perfume of love shared and an unbounded loyalty.

The clue to why Mary did this was in where Mary poured the oil. Everyone knew what anointing was about. It was something done to a king, a priest or a prophet to mark that person as having a special, elevated role. The oil was poured on the head - like the psalm of King David 'You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows' (Psalm 23.5). But not here. Other anointing was for someone who had died: it was an action that marked the change from a living member of the family to someone honored among the ranks of ancestors. But that was not done here either.

No, Mary anointed Jesus' feet. Jesus would walk to his destiny in Jerusalem. His feet would carry him before his accusers. His feet would drag his weary flesh and the weight of the cross through the streets. His feet were nailed so that he could walk no further. His feet were the center of everything that was about to happen to Jesus. And Mary's use of oil signified her acknowledgement of that.

Mary humbled herself - taking the form of a slave. She exposed herself to ridicule. She became the victim of taunts. But Mary displayed a love that was unbounded. She prefigured in this domestic scene the humbling things Jesus would undergo in the public arena. Yes, it was Mary who understood; Mary who followed the steps of her Lord; Mary who risked herself with a loyalty that went far beyond the threats of death; Mary who was the first apostle of resurrection love; Mary who filled the house with the fragrance of love - in face of the skepticism and mocking of those who just looked on.

Love, real love, has a smell about it. Its existence fills the air, like a scent does. Mary's action filled the room with the scent of love. She had an awareness of what was going on around them that escaped all the others. Peter, a few days later, refused to let Jesus wash his feet; he just didn't get what was happening and refused, at least at first, to be associated with all these things about feet - action, and humility, and service, and movement. Yet Mary reached out to the One and demonstrated her understanding, her compassion and her willingness to be involved - the scent of love. There was lavishness to her devotion that anticipated the honor that would be granted to the risen and glorified Lord. Mary was already there - in imagination at least, beyond the suffering and death into eternal truth.

The effect of Mary wiping the excess ointment from Jesus' feet with her hair was that her own head was anointed through the body of Jesus. In that anointing the scent of love permeated the house even further. Just a little earlier in John's Gospel there had been a worry about smell. When Jesus asked that the tomb of dead Lazarus be opened, Martha, Mary's sister, had been fearful of the stink of death that would result.

Then Mary released into the atmosphere the smell of life.

This is what an anointed disciple is about - spreading the smell of love through the world. Mary was the forerunner, the prototype, of what Jesus' followers must be - those who bring the scent of life with them - we who bring the scent of love with

us - wherever we go.

And that brings us to Judas. If Mary recognized what the others were too dull to see - then Judas stood for the ones who didn't have the patience to wait for what might be. He was the man of instant solutions - if this much ointment could be wasted, there must have been more and the sale of it would make an instant impact. Think of how much poverty could be relieved; of how much influence could be achieved. He was the keeper of the purse and he thought always in money terms - that's what counted in the end. This was the stench of calculation and greed.

But Mary's action said something different - it said that beyond these interminable problems, beyond commonplace human hurt and suffering - there is a better way - one that can only come to light through what Jesus had to endure.

Mary did the lavish thing; the thing that so many would misunderstand and even raise their voices against in condemnation. But Jesus knew different. There was Mary, the one who anointed and was herself anointed; the true disciple of Jesus; the one who dared to act out what she recognized as true. She was ahead of the pack - the others failed to see it, but she knew and she lived it. She let the scent of life invade the gloom of fear - the dark clouds were forming, terrible things were going to happen, but the scent of love would not be extinguished.

'Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair.' This is pure devotion. This is extravagant love - it's recognition of love's power. Here is something to delight in; something to make us wonder; something to give us hope.

Take a deep breath, catch the fragrance of extravagant love - it travels, it fills the air, if only you will let it.