

Sermon – Sunday April 3, 2022

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In New Testament times, feet smelled worse than they do in modern times. Not only were the roads dusty, but sometimes they resembled sewers. To make matters worse, people often ate from a reclining position, which meant their feet were near someone's face during the meal. Usually, the host would assign a servant to wash guests' feet. Seldom would hosts perform this task themselves. And, they didn't use expensive perfume or wipe the feet with their hair. Yet Mary, the hostess, is washing Jesus's feet with perfume made of nard that cost a year's wages.

Her action, then, so different from the day's customs, isn't merely for foot grooming. It's a symbolic ritual. Anointing usually took place during times of status transformation. This same event is reported in the Synoptic Gospels, but Jesus's head is anointed. The anointing of a head signals an increase in status. Kings and priests were anointed to symbolize their transformation to this new position. The Synoptics use this story to signify the upcoming ride into Jerusalem when the people will shout "Hosanna" and proclaim Jesus as king.

Anointing in New Testament Israelite society also took place at death, signaling the transformation of a person from a family member to an ancestor. Anointing for death, however, was typically the entire body.

But in John's Gospel which we have this Sunday, Jesus's feet were anointed. That's different, too. In the Jewish society of New Testament times, the feet signified action. So Mary's anointing of Jesus indicates that Jesus is about to undertake a transforming action and that Mary supports that action.

The use of nard is significant, too. Nard, also known as spikenard, is an essential oil. Its fragrance can draw the recipient inward, allowing for contemplative action and a greater connection with God's Spirit. It can also aid in what might be called "cognitive flexibility," which releases old thinking patterns, purifying and cleansing. During times of both inward and outward transformation, nard acts as a stabilizing agent and provides a sense of support. Mary's use of nard also supported Jesus as He prepared to enter Passion Week, a time of high emotions and great pain that would lead to resurrection. Jesus was fully human and about to face unspeakable horrors, so the nard's healing properties were a great gift to him.

Jesus was about to do a new thing. Jesus was about to undertake an action that would transform Himself and the entire world. Jesus was about to die and rise again so humanity could receive the forgiveness of sins and be reborn. He was about to die and rise again so that every time we miss the mark of what God calls us to be, we can say

we're sorry, change directions, and begin again. He was about to die and rise again so that we can become all that God intended through His Spirit that dwells within us.

Mary anointed Jesus's feet with nard because she understood what many of his disciples could not yet understand. She comprehended the impending transforming death of their Master and their Messiah.

Interestingly as Jesus began His journey to the cross, disciples of many persuasions went along that journey with him. Mary, who has shown her love and support for him in this anointing, as well as Judas, who will betray him. The apostle John who will stand at the foot of the cross, and Peter who will deny Jesus and run away. Jesus includes them all. Jesus's willingness to take all of them with him on this journey speaks volumes about the meaning of the cross and God's grace. Jesus offers transformation to any who will accept it, whether they are the worst sinner, the holiest saint, or the rest of us who fall somewhere in between.

Jesus was about to do something extraordinary. His actions would provide the opportunity for each of us, through grace, to become new people. St. Benedict's famous quote, "Always we begin again," applies here. Because of the cross, we can begin again every day with a clean slate even if we failed miserably the day before. We just need to do a couple of things. First, we need to be merciful to ourselves and realize that to be human is to fail sometimes. Then we recognize where we miss the mark and pray for the Spirit to help us change. God's response will be to continually re-create us, transforming us into holier people.

Jesus attended the dinner party with Lazarus and Martha, and Mary at a pivotal time. "Behold, God was about to do a new thing." Mary recognized this and honored this new thing. Because of that new thing Jesus did, we can always begin again.