

SERMON

Pastor Cris Frigm

Lessons from a Winter Rose

I am dumbfounded by the sheer persistence of a winter rose

that blooms

on the coldest of days— when the rest of the world has turned dim and gray,

when the rest of the world is sleeping.

The audacity to stand so tall,

to decorate the world with color,

to be the only one brave enough to bloom.

I wonder what that's like.

Maybe it's similar to pouring perfume on the feet of Jesus— shocking and beautiful at the same time.

On winter morning walks I pass a bed of roses.

I dare not pick one. Instead I say thank you. Thank you for the beauty. Thank you for the reminder. Thank you for the bloom. And I walk home and pray—

God, if you can, make me that brave.

We've been cruising along this Lenten season with a pretty cohesive story being told by Luke's Gospel. If not always narratively intact, it at least had the same overarching themes lifted up by the author. When you spend a significant amount of time within one gospel, the story just fits together so nicely. We'll return to hear the climax of that particular story in the next two weeks, but we take a hard left this week into a different Gospel. Same story, different – some would argue much different – emphasis and thematic perspective on the story of Jesus' life.

The authors and hearers/readers of these two accounts are vastly different. They were sharing an oral tradition in different times, in different communities. And it makes a difference – not in the overall scheme of God at work in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus – but how we live out what we hear and understand in these stories is flavored by the

nuance of how the story is told.

So, we're going to take a few moments to set ourselves in John's Gospel before we dive into the specific events we hear today.

Note first, that the events that surround this 8-verse story have much to say about what is happening. Jesus is in the home of Lazarus, with at least his sisters, Mary and Martha, and Judas. We can probably infer there were other disciples there, but that's who's named in the story. Because we've jumped so abruptly into this Gospel, we need to keep in mind that not too long before, and fresh in the minds of the first hearers is that this same Lazarus was brought back from the tomb. That emotional saga of a family – including this Mary and Martha – experiencing the shift from mourning to celebration is the set up for this meal.

In the intervening verses, we hear that the raising of Lazarus was the last straw for the Jewish authorities. Jesus is now public enemy number one for them because he's a threat to their very existence. Jesus is in hiding because the Pharisees and chief priests have put a price on his head and ordered anyone who knows where he is to tell them so he can be arrested. The endgame is set. The final act is at hand. The Passover is coming.

And Jesus is going to be in Jerusalem for the Passover, knowing what it means to go there, knowing what the authorities are going to do, knowing that Judas will betray him. He comes to the home of his friend perhaps for a moment of nourishment and fellowship as his earthly journey is coming to an end. And in that close circle, in that intimate dinner, one of his devoted followers, Mary – who had witnessed the power of the Messiah firsthand as he conquered death – brazenly and lavishly pours out all that she has on his feet.

Now, some of you, like me, are probably cringing a bit at the image of someone anointing your feet. But I want to make sure we're all cringing just a little bit more.

Because as off-putting as it may sound to have someone else washing your feet, it's so much more than that. Mary, seemingly an unmarried woman, takes on the role of either the basest slave or closest lover to care for Jesus in the most intimate way imaginable...without a change in movie rating. It's not just that she takes on the role of a servant or slave to clean his feet. She does it with her hair unbound so she can use her hair in her work. Women didn't unbind their hair in the presence of anyone other than their husband. Mary's act is **extremely** intimate and likely made everyone uncomfortable.

She uses an exorbitantly expensive supply of perfume – most likely the type of oil that would be used to prepare a body. Remember, this was a family who would've just

buried their brother, **after** anointing him in a similar way. It's not like she just had this large quantity of an expensive luxury item just lying there unused.

She throws all the barriers to the wind and brazenly does what she can to care for the one she has recognized as the Messiah. She anoints the anointed one. She anoints the one who will soon be suffering the agony of public torture and death. Six days before the Passover – the Passover at which Jesus will be on a cross – Mary acts with brazen love to care for him. **She** doesn't know what is to come, but Jesus knows (in John's Gospel). Jesus recognizes this moment for what it is. He knows he has been lovingly prepared for his burial, and you can hear his recognition and appreciation for what she has done as he responds to Judas.

We don't have time now to delve too deeply into Judas' story – and it's probably more complicated than we like to think – John's parenthetical notes notwithstanding. But in Jesus' response to Judas' complaint, we hear his admiration for her and her loving act. “I will not always be here,” he says, “and she has prepared me for what is to come.”

A quick note to say that Jesus' comment about the poor always being present is not to suggest that we aren't supposed to care for the poor, as this has been cynically interpreted at times. Jesus was likely quoting Deuteronomy in which Jewish law says, “There will never cease to be some poor people in the land; therefore, I am commanding you to make sure you open your hand to your fellow Israelites who are needy and poor in your land.” (15.11)

Mary acts to celebrate the beauty of life in that particular moment, in spite of the death that is to come. Judas loses sight of that reality and focuses on the coins instead of the truth of God's love. Judas is sitting at the other side of Jesus trying to figure out how much care is required of him instead of seeing that everything is required of us if we are going to hold onto beauty in the face of death. Everything that we are and everything we have is for us to proclaim love and beauty in the midst of death and betrayal.

Sometimes it might seem overwhelming. Right now, it feels like hate is winning. Right now, the world is fracturing like it hasn't in my lifetime. Right now, the ugliest deeds are praised by some as being practical and necessary to hold onto earthly wealth and power. But in the face of that ugliness and derision kneel the Marys of this world, the ones who are willing to humbly serve with love, the ones who withhold nothing for the sake of the other. Brazen acts of beauty defy the power of this world. Brazen acts of beauty bring us to the cross.

I don't have hair to let down, but I hope I can find ways to follow in her footsteps and

confront the death around us with the hope and faith that she had as she knelt before Jesus and claimed her place in the history of discipleship. I hope I can find ways to help love win. Amen.