

# Discovering Compassion

*The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME*

Saturday, April 06, 2019

Scripture: [John 12:1–8](#)

## Sermon

This scripture is not a fragrance-free space. The closeness of a room by night... dishes and food still scattered on a table. Friends gathered after a hot day, a lot of walking, some working, some preparing the meal. And then, Mary arrives with her alabaster jar, pouring rich perfume over Jesus... It is *not* fragrance free. It is of a time before such a thing could be possible, and of a time when what smelled was often... well let's just say there weren't a lot of artificial flavors... this was a very natural time for smell! Which admittedly would have been better for folks who now have severe sensitivities to the artificial smells we live in.

Either because I have dogs, who systematically destroy your sensitivities to smell, or because I live in our modern world in which I more often than not spend time in my own personal spaces... I admit, I rarely have to contend with smell as a character in a story of mine. Here it is inescapable.

Today's story appears of the lavish love of Jesus appears in every gospel, but only in John, the latest of the gospels does this woman who anoints Jesus have a name. Here, we meet her as Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus. We meet her as a dear friend, and devout believer of what Jesus's ministry can mean and do... it has meant that one she loved most of all that once was dead... is alive again.

Mary anoints Jesus with all that love: the richness of the smell—and the intimacy of the touch—kind of a scandal to our modern sensibilities... and those of the disciples, apparently. Particularly Judas.

Anointing with oil is a practice of faith that has lots of layers and varieties:

- Priests and kings are anointed into their roles. - 1 Samuel 16
- The sick are called to be anointed in the New Testament - James 5:14
- The dead are anointed for burial. - Lots of places.

The amazing thing about the whole Jesus story for us is that through our belief in his humanity and his divinity we find in everything he does, everything he says, everything that happens... a sign and statement about God, but also about ourselves.

In true Gospel form, Mary both gets it profoundly right that Jesus is holy, worthy of anointing for heaven... **and** that Jesus is her truly human friend, worthy of honor and grieving on the way of death.

It's this last anointing that Jesus calls out particularly in the scripture today: that Mary is anointing him for burial. It is sometimes made into a big deal that Jesus knew he was going to die... like that proves his "God-ness" like he was a fortune-teller. I think it shows his "humanness" first: he knew he was going to die because, well, we all do... and because that especially tends to happen when you rebuke the joint leaders of religious collaborators with the forces of empire. We can remember that sadly on a week where we marked the 51st anniversary of the Rev. Martin Luther King's assassination. Jesus's "God-ness"—and King's holiness—might best be proved by the fact Jesus went on to Jerusalem anyway... and Martin went to Memphis.

In Jesus's time, and in ours, pain, illness, and death can be tempting to pull away from... to retreat from, to cover up with platitudes and shiny motivational nuggets... Instead, Mary seals her commitment and love of Jesus in the oil. She will stand as a stark contrast to Jesus's disciples, who in the days to come will walk paths of betrayal, and disavowal, and desertion... Instead, Mary says... I will not let go... I mark you as holy. And so, before she has to say good-bye, Mary breaks open this jar. Her compassion is in her connection and treasuring of Jesus's life.

She insists that a human life, this human life, is worthy of extravagance. Tomorrow we will still need to create a more just world, a more whole world, a more equal world... but part of how we do that today is to recognize that each life is priceless.

Have you ever noticed how much touch begins to matter, to change in the last days of a loved one? I might wish that you had never had to notice, but you probably have. I wonder if the practice of anointing has survived because it gives us a reason to love each other with touch in a way that the culture doesn't.

We live in profoundly distant space from each other some times. As much as I know smell is not a part of most of my stories, so is touch absent from a lot of life. As Americans we have very tough social space bubbles. I know that for myself, I have been working a lot of my life to build up a trust and capacity to touch and be touched. I know that so many people have had experiences of touch that rob them of trust, of safety and agency, of wholeness. I know that it is apparent we need refresher courses for some folks that touch which is uninvited, unasked for, or unwelcome is never beneficial.

But nurses, doctors, and other care-givers can tell you how much touch is an essential element of their care. Studies now reveal all manner of benefits from caring touch... as a psychological act of connection, to a chemical and nervous reaction that can even relieve pain and suffering.

In the past few weeks, I have been especially thankful for the many hospice nurses I have encountered in my life and career who have lovingly modeled touch, drawing loved ones from the corners of rooms when they might be tempted to hang back... to instead sit by bedsides, to hold hands lovingly, to lay hands on a loved one... even as they breathe their last.

I am thankful for Mary, who did not count the cost of honoring her friend, her teacher, and in fact the Holy One with touch, and tears, and love. I am thankful that her wisdom and her compassion have shown through the ages: to reject anything that would try and get us to pit the value of one life against

another... and to hold tenderly in our hands each life and love we are so gifted to be able to touch... as priceless.

So today, before we pray for others, for ourselves... I want to invite you into a prayer and practice of healing, and of touch. I want to treasure and honor those you are caring for... and treasure you. I'll invite you to come forward...

*Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. - James 5:14*