

Sermon

Full to the Brim — Brazen Acts of Beauty

A Sermon for Cary Presbyterian Church

Sunday, April 3, 2022

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Prayer for Illumination:

Lord, we join our voices with the Psalmist who sings, “Let my prayer arise before you as incense, the raising of my hands like an evening oblation.” May our devotion to you fill this sanctuary with the fragrance of love. The calculating part of us will think that it is an embarrassment, this “public display of affection.” But we align ourselves with Mary, who at great expense anointed your feet in anticipation of your sacrifice.

Speak to us today a word about brazen acts of beauty. Embolden us for costly displays of charity — all that we might dare to match your grace with our own. In the name of the one who was, who is, and who is to come. Jesus, the Christ, Amen.

Is. 43:16 Thus says the LORD,
*who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,*
*17 who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;*
*they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:*
*18 Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.*
19 I am about to do a new thing;

*now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.*

20 *The wild animals will honor me,
the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,*

21 *the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.*

John 12:1 Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 3 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. 4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5 "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" 6 (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) 7 Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8 You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

I. In the Gospel According to John

A. Chapters 11 & 12 mark the spot where the narrative moment is *forced to its crisis*.

B. Chapter 11

1. Jesus raises Lazareth (Mary & Martha's brother) from the dead after 4 days in the tomb.

2. This stirs the Pharisees to tell the chief priests about the miracle and they conspire to have Jesus killed.

3. By the end of chapter 11:

John 11:54 Jesus therefore no longer walked about openly among the Jews, but went from there to a town called Ephraim in the region near the wilderness; and he remained there with the disciples.

- C. It is in this highly charged context that Jesus returns to the home of Mary and Martha and Mary engages in her brazen act of love.**
- D. John does not use the word “beautiful” to describe this act of compassion, but that, perhaps, is because it is so *obviously beautiful* that to point out the beauty would be like explaining a joke.**
- E. And like all truly loving acts this moment between Mary and Jesus is beautiful.**
- 1. He**
 - † weary from ministry,
 - † knowing of the plots to destroy him,
 - † surrounded by disciples who often don’t understand what he is doing.
 - 2. She moved to behave extravagantly in a shameless act of public affection.**
 - † An excessive quantity of nard
 - * Rare oil from plant like a honeysuckle (spikenard)
 - * Wiping feet with hair
 - 3. It is an embarrassment of affection**
 - † But love always is . . .

II. Love is *costly* and unmotivated by the dictates of being *seemly*.

A. In fact, it is precisely because love *is not calculated*

† **Neither calculating the cost**

† **Nor calculating the social capital lost
which makes it so beautiful.**

**B. In this moment from John 12, Judas is the one who
calculates:**

4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5 “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?”

† **John cannot help but go on to point out the
apparent hypocrisy of Judas’ economic concerns:**

6 (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.)

**BUT before we too quickly and too happily join in as a
Greek chorus to condemn Judas . . . let us at least consider
how often we let our own calculations prevent us from being
generous with those in need.**

† **Asserting that if we give the beggar \$ they will
only waste it somehow**

† **Concluding that because the government does
not always use our tax dollars most efficiently,
we should feel OK about our parsimonious
impulses about taxation.**

† **Living most of our lives so preoccupied with
wanting to assure that we get our share that
we justify our refusal to care for those most in
need.**

**Judas is an easy target . . . but surely in the season of
Lent — when you and I are meant to be spending 7 weeks**

practicing self-examination — surely in Lent we can see and acknowledge that, truth be told, we are easy targets too.

III. Love is not *just* costly. It is good, and true, and beautiful too.

- A. From way back in the time of Aristotle we concluded that ontology (that is “to be”) was inextricably connected with *being*:**
 - 1. Good**
 - 2. True**
 - 3. Beautiful**
- B. Thomas Aquinas (the great Christian theologian and philosopher of the 13th century) uses these same categories in writing about the “transcendentals” — that is properties which belong to all real beings.**
- C. Mary shows that she is truly alive in John’s gospel precisely through this act of brazen beauty which grows from her depth of love.**

IV. I have been noticing how beautiful love is recently.

- A. My shameless love of Rom-Com movies**
- B. My crying at poignant moments in “coming of age” movies:**
 - † Perks of Being a Wall Flower**
 - † CODA**
- C. But in the news too — and from surprising places**
 - † Ukranian soldier walking hand in hand through war-torn rubble with a toddler**

- † **A children’s choir singing a familiar prayer in London**
- † **Reading a first-hand account of a 17th century Icelandic pastor who was enslaved by Ottoman invaders and taken far away from home . . . which is just as brutal as you think it might be, but which also had surprising moments of tenderness and care. (Diary of Ólafur Egilsson).**

V. Beauty has long been understood to point the way to God.

A. The late 5th to early 6th century

“Beauty is the source of all things...It is the great creating cause which bestirs the world and holds all things in existence by the longing inside them to have beauty...It is the longing for beauty which actually brings them into being.” from *The Divine Names*, Pseudo-Dionysius the Aeropagite.

B. The 20th century

“God is beautiful. Beautiful...as a fact and as a force in the manner in which he asserts himself as the one who arouses pleasure, creates desire for himself, and rewards with delight..., the one who as God is both lovely and love-worthy.” — Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1 (1970)

C. But John’s gospel reminds us that the beauty of God’s love (and of our love for God) is always played out in the narrative of its cost.

- 1. Mary’s love is not self-conscious, is not calculating — but it is nevertheless *costly*.**
- 2. John’s gospel (and the season of Lent) remind us that *our story* the story at the heart of our faith — that story is a story about the enormous cost of beautiful and brazen acts of love.**

- D. Jesus is fast-approaching to horrors of Holy Week when this moment of extravagant beauty transpires.**
- E. I suppose the question, which Karl Barth’s comment about the beauty of God prompts is this: “Are we like Mary? Do we see God as both lovely and love-worthy?”**

**AND — if we say “Yes, I love God” . . .
then**

- † **what is our bottle of Nard?**
- † **When will we stop calculating long enough to engage in brazen acts of beauty?**

VI. Time is short.

- A. A week from today we begin Holy Week with Palm Sunday.**
- B. Let us not tarry in finding our nard and showing our love for, as the apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth:**

2Cor. 6:1 As we work together with [Christ] we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. 2 For he says,

*“At an acceptable time I have listened to you,
and on a day of salvation I have helped you.”*

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!