

A parable of preparation: A sermon for Lent 5, Year C (John 12:1–8)

Given by Kyle Oliver at St. Paul's Parish, K Street, Washington D.C.

I was speaking recently with a teacher at a religious high school. She had been studying this passage from John's gospel with her students and was both charmed and surprised by their reaction. The conversation had apparently become totally unglued by the class's collective dismay at Jesus's final words: "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

"How can he say that?" they asked. I think they sensed in his words either an indifference to a tragic fact or a hopelessness in the face of a challenge that Jesus could have solved. After all, he has just raised poor Lazarus from the dead; surely with a strategic loaves and fishes campaign he could have raised the poor's standard of living. And that 300 denarii for the perfume could have been important seed money.

But I don't want to pick on my friend's students, because in many ways I agree with them. Like so many of my fellow Midwesterners, I have a pronounced cultural discomfort with luxury and ostentatious displays of wealth. I'm very much the son of two parents who went out shopping for what they called "a midlife crisis car" but who came back not with the Mustang or Charger they'd imaged but with a Volkswagon Cabrio. It's the world's most sensible convertible.

And there's nothing sensible about Mary's action in this story, at least not at first glance. To even possess a jar of perfume worth a year's wages is very strange for a woman we assume was poor, so strange that one commentator speculates that it must have been a "family treasure."¹ Of course, Judas's disingenuous suggestion still stands in that case: why not give this wealth away to those in need? And why squander it so wantonly on a sentimental act, especially toward someone who has carefully avoided the trappings of wealth and power?

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The answer Jesus gives is all about preparation. “Jesus said, ‘Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.’” We’ve all just had an encounter with the stench of death and another death is coming. Let this fragrance fill the room and remind us that the next death will make possible the royal victory for which I have been anointed.

So my answer to my friend’s students is that Jesus is neither indifferent to nor hopeless against the plight of people who are poor—then or now. However, in this luxurious scene, he is being prepared for a task he must accomplish for the whole world’s sake. Mary’s prophetic action draws our attention to the nature and the gravity of that work. Perhaps it’s even necessary, in a way, that Jesus be anointed now rather than in the tomb, for in John’s gospel, Jesus reigns not just from beyond the grave but *from the cross*, not with an anguished cry but with a dignified declaration: “It is finished.” However you look at it, though, the perfume incident only makes sense in light of what is to come.

So wonder if we might, with apologies to Blessed John, read this story as a sort of parable of the season of Lent, a parable of our own preparation for what lies ahead. Though many in the church are fasting, Lent is in other ways a season of indulgence. The act of examination and repentance is an inward journey, requiring an almost lavish self-focus. I’ve noticed that the brief homilies I give at daily masses have followed that pattern, dwelling on our inner lives and our life as a congregation. And my own Lenten practice has been less about giving alms than about resting in God’s arms.

They warn us at the seminary that inward focus is a recipe for stagnation, because disciples, to be disciples, must ultimately look outward. Indeed, that idea will probably sound familiar to those of you who attended Canon Joey Rick’s presentation on evangelism and congregational vitality on Wednesday. The point is, if we’ve been dwelling on ourselves a bit more than usual of late, then it had better be to prepare for something bigger.

What are we preparing for? If the answer is *just* our experience of the Triduum and the

Easter celebration that follows, then we're not hearing the fullness of Jesus's call for us to live lives of service to those in need.

What are we preparing for? If the answer is *just* that outpouring of peace and thanksgiving that comes with the sure knowledge of our forgiveness, then we're living large on God's gift of grace, a gift that imparts its full meaning not just when we receive it, but when we give it away.

What are we preparing for? Not just to be redeemed and sanctified, although we surely will be. We are preparing as well to be renewed and sent out, to be vessels of grace in a world that needs it now as ever. Vessels of grace ...

The more I've thought about it this week, the more I've believed that we're preparing to be like that little jar of perfume. Could that be true?

What if we are God's precious investment, bought for a costly price indeed, but ultimately worth it because of our sacred purpose? If that's true, it reminds us of the importance of this period of discernment in the life of St. Paul's and our need to answer anew our questions of God's purposes for us.

What if we are the oil of anointing for the sick and the suffering, marking those we serve with a sign of their true dignity and stature in the kingdom of God? If that's true, then visiting parishioners who are ill and feeding neighbors who are hungry will become, more and more, not just our duty but our joy. Jesus, and my friend's high school religion class, would approve.

What if we are the fragrance that fills this house of worship and then spills into the streets, making it possible for our neighbors to encounter in us the beauty of holiness? If that's true, then our amazing Ash Wednesday experience might mark the beginning of a new chapter in the story of our life as friends and neighbors in Foggy Bottom.

What if we are holy vessels, chosen and sanctified for carrying to others the grace of God in Christ?

My sisters and brothers I pray that Lent continue to be, for us, forty luxurious days of preparation, so that when the time comes, we may follow the Risen Christ from “What if?”s to what’s next.