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Peoples Presbyterian Church
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John 12:1-8
Isaiah 43:16-21
Lent 5

ISAIAH 43:16-21

¹⁶Thus says the LORD,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
¹⁷who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:
¹⁸Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
¹⁹I 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.
²⁰The 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,
²¹the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.

JOHN 12:1-8

¹Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ²There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³Mary 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. ⁴But 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.) ⁷Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

SERMON

When I was around 8 years old my mother and her sisters took my little sister and I out for high tea at the Heathman Hotel in

downtown Portland. It's one of the things I'm looking forward to doing with Enoch when he's a little older. I remember Lauren and I put on our fanciest dresses and our shiny party shoes—I still have the photo, I wore a green dress with tiny pink roses on it, with a blouse that looked exactly like that silly, puffy shirt from Seinfeld—and we felt so grown up when we each received our own pot of hot chocolate and a tiny tower of tea treats to enjoy. We went to great lengths to stick out our pinky fingers while drinking our hot chocolate, and we did our best not to slam and rattle our cups on the saucers.

Again, when I was 14 I found myself in Victoria, Canada with my extended family. The highlight of that trip, to me, was high tea at the Palm Court of the Empress Hotel, which still likes to remind everyone that they once hosted the Queen of England for tea...back in 1939 and most recently in 2002. They served all the classics: good, strong black tea, scones with jam and cream, tiny cakes and cucumber sandwiches. I returned and had tea at the Empress again with some friends during college. We travelled up on the ferry to Victoria, in our most adult clothing, especially for the afternoon tea service at the Empress. It was a trip we saved for, for months ahead of time, and it was both an extravagance and one of our best college memories.

High tea with my family and friends, for me, is one of the most cherished and over the top memories I have. Each of these stories brings to mind people I love, the luxury of being served perfect, tiny portions of delicious treats, spending hours talking around marble tables and velvet chairs under tiffany glass ceilings. I'm not usually a fancy—glamorous kind of girl, I'm not into expensive wine or

black-tie affairs, I'd always prefer to be in my house, in yoga pants, having a homemade dinner with friends. But I make an exception for high tea: the more extravagant, the better. It's an experience worth every penny, in my world, for the graciousness of the hospitality and the beloved memory of time spent together.

And, of course, I'm giving you glimpses of these memories of mine because when I read our story for today, this is the parallel that, for me, floats to the surface. Jesus and his friends were gathered around a table together, in the home of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. They were throwing a dinner in his honor, in thanks for Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Now, the Bible doesn't say so, but I'd assume that if I were throwing a thank you dinner for my brother who came back to life, you'd better believe I'd be pulling out every last stop: the best food, the best wine, the best china, the best of everything, because even that wouldn't be enough to express my gratitude for a life brought back from the grave. This dinner is a feast to be remembered: the night we got Lazarus back, his rebirthday, of sorts. It reminds me of those teas because it includes all the same touch points: an extravagant and memorable meal, shared around a table with those I love most, spending all the time in the world talking and being together.

And then we have a very unique and beautiful moment, far outside anything I ever experienced at tea with my grandma and aunts and friends: Mary comes to offer her gift. She walks into the room with this jar of solid perfume, a whole pound of it. And she breaks the jar over Jesus' feet and begins to rub the oily, fragrant nard into his feet with her hair. Instantly, the room is filled with the overwhelming scent of Mary's offering, but not in a bad way, it seems. More in the

way that you could imagine everything going quiet, all of the disciples and friends simply pausing to smell and to listen and to breathe deeply this tremendous gift being offered in front of their eyes. Silence and reverence for this anointing. It's an unbelievable gift of love and friendship and care.

But then, Judas breaks the spell. "Oh, come on!" he says, "That's an insane thing she just did! Think about how much money that gift cost! There are starving children in Africa and she just wasted all of that money on some stupid, stinky perfume. C'mon Jesus, tell her off." As Judas is speaking, I can imagine Mary's face going red with shame and embarrassment. I mean, to even put this perfume on Jesus feet, and wipe it with you hair to start with, that's an intimate and tender act, it's extremely fragile, and then to have the scoundrel Judas stop all over it? It's a horrible, painful scene. If I were here, I'd be beet-red and crying, just utterly embarrassed, I'm not sure if I'd even still be in the room, I may have run away. It's awful. It's as if my aunt, at that tea so many years ago, shouted out to my grandmother, sitting in the middle of the palm court: You spent hundreds of dollars to take us all out to this crazy place with its fancy ceiling, and all we're eating is dry sandwiches with their crusts cut off! That money could have fed homeless people for weeks! What a horrible, terrible waste. What a selfish and thoughtless act.

Now, there is certainly a time to consider the needs of others, and as Christians we are called to abandon luxury and selfish pleasure in order to serve the poor and provide for the least around us. That is very true. That's basically 99% of Jesus' teachings right there: you only need one cloak, give the other to the poor. But that's not what this story is about. The writer of the gospel makes that clear when

he tells us that Judas didn't actually care about the poor...he really only cared about skimming a little off the top from the money that was donated. The writer makes it abundantly clear: this is not about Mary and Jesus being selfish and wasteful, this is about Judas being the selfish jerk and heaping shame on Mary in the process.

It's not a biblical warrant to go out and live an over the top, luxurious life filled with fancy watches and caviar at every meal...but I do think this is a story that highlights how important it is to honor our friendships and relationships deeply, and to create spaces for celebration and memory, around feasting tables together.

Now, there is a theological overtone to this whole scene. This takes place a little over a week before Jesus is crucified, and he himself notes that Mary's nard is anointing him for his burial. So, this isn't a one-to-one comparison with my childhood memories of high tea. There wasn't any sort of proclamation of Jesus as messiah around those Peter Rabbit tea pots. So, let's be careful not to stretch this story too far.

However, in the same vein as last week, trying to see the humanity in Jesus, and not just the divinity, I love this story because of what I see: I see friends gathered around a beautiful, fancy, extravagant feast together. I see Mary, Martha, Jesus, Lazarus, and the twelve others, and probably some other friends and family, laughing and drinking and eating and enjoying a late night spent in the company of their closest loved ones. I see a beautiful, expensive, luxurious gift given, in honor and in praise of who Jesus was to Mary. It's a stunning scene really: so very relatable, and so poignant as it really is one of the last truly beautiful memories of Jesus before the events

of his trial and crucifixion. Even this scene, with the presence of Judas, carries a bit of a shadow.

What I'm going to take from this story, this week, is the reminder and invitation to celebrate together. To occasionally look for ways of offering exceptional hospitality to my family, in order to build these beautiful experiences of life lived together around a table. Because our lives as disciples of Jesus are shaped by exactly this: we know Christ first in the relationships which are dearest to us. We come to know him through those who love us most, who live as examples of his love. And then from those relationships we can then go out from the table, to become the love of Jesus for one another in other ways. But it starts at and is refueled by time spent together, around a table, with those we love.