

Grace to you and peace from God, our Creator, and from our Savior, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

¹Each of the gospels records a story about a woman who anoints Jesus. In Matthew and Mark, she is unnamed and she anoints Jesus' head at the house of Simon the Leper during what we call Holy Week. In Luke, she is also unnamed and she anoints Jesus at Simon the Pharisee's house earlier in Jesus' ministry.

Only in John's gospel does a woman anoint Jesus' feet. And only in John's gospel does she have a name and a relationship with Jesus. Mary, along with her siblings Martha and Lazarus, were longtime and close friends of Jesus.

On any other occasion, this would be an ordinary dinner with friends in their home. Conversation, reclining around the table – because tables were lower to the ground then, everyone relaxed and comfortable. But when we read this story, there's a little bit of anticipation and maybe even some anxiety, because we know what's going to happen a few days later.

This is one of the last times, if not the last time, that Jesus would be able to relax with his friends before his arrest and crucifixion. It's a different kind of last supper.

Everyone in the story knew how dangerous it was for Jesus to be there. He'd raised Lazarus from the dead not long before, so there was a plot to kill both Jesus and Lazarus. So, there was probably some tension in the room, but there was also an abundance of love.

And that love spilled over as Mary anointed Jesus' feet, the scent of the perfume filling the house. To give you an idea of how powerful the scent was, nard - or spikenard as its also called – is in the honeysuckle family. There's nothing subtle about the smell.

It was customary for people's feet to be washed when they entered someone's home. And it wasn't unheard of to anoint the head of an honored guest. But anointing someone's feet, especially to the point that the oil needed to be absorbed with someone's hair, was unusual.

¹ https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002928/the_prophet_mary

It probably made things feel a little awkward – adding to the tension that was already there.

And as the aroma of the perfume filled the house, the tension of the whole situation reached its peak with Judas' question – why wasn't the perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It's a valid point.

But in his response, Jesus reveals the heart of his call for his disciples to serve one another in love. He'd been modeling it for them all throughout his ministry. But here, it foreshadows his washing the disciples' feet a few nights later.

And it gives a clear hint at the new commandment he will leave with them, which is to love one another as he has loved them.

And his answer to Judas, "you always have the poor with you" has, historically, been used as an excuse to not help people in need. ²But Pastor Phil Ruge-Jones tells us that a less literal way of translating it is, "As long as you follow me, you will always stand among the poor." And I think that's closer to what Jesus meant, especially when it's taken together with Mary's actions.

She exemplifies Jesus' call to serve one another in love. Earlier in the gospel, the first time she was at Jesus' feet, she listened and learned and received love. This time, she's putting into practice what she'd learned from him.

She's the first disciple to live into a life of service that's based in Christ's abundant love and she models it for others – including us. Because to love one another as Jesus loves us, is to serve from that love and with that love.

As people who follow Jesus, we know that he calls us to serve others in love. We know this – it's a core part of our identity as Christians. And here at Saint Andrew's, it's part of our mission statement.

But when it comes to serving others, there are two sides to the discussion: one that says we need to be responsible with our resources and use them wisely. That's reality and it's also a biblical mandate. But the other says that true Christian stewardship also includes abundant love that leads us to do what others may consider to be wasteful. That's also reality, and the love is a biblical mandate.

² Rev. Phil Ruge-Jones, Early Sermon Seeds.

Mary did what she did out of the overflowing abundance of Jesus' love; that's why she was able to anoint his feet that night. She had received that love from Jesus and so she, in turn, was able to serve him and others, and to share that love with them.

³When we consider what that means for how we serve others in Jesus' name today, serving from and with the love of Jesus, it means recognizing that that love goes both ways. Too often, we get so caught up in making sure we're doing "enough" to serve others that it becomes a one-way street:

...we give to a person or people and then walk away because we've shared Christ's love with them and, as far as we're concerned, that's the end of it because we don't think they have anything to give us.

But when we do that over and over again, it's no longer about love. It's about power – holding power over someone. Not recognizing the love of Christ that is within them – the love from which, and with which, they serve. Same as us.

And it's a fine line, because we never intend for it to become that. But serving in true, Christian love means that we must also be open to receiving that love from others.

When I served in Costa Rica, I organized short-term mission trips for ELCA congregations to come and work in the Costa Rican Lutheran Church communities. Usually, they did a building project or ran a Vacation Bible School. And in the process, they built relationships with the people who live there.

At the end of their time, it was common for the community to organize a meal or a party to thank their guests for the work they'd done. In one community in particular, the poverty was everywhere you looked. You couldn't not see it. And the people there threw a party for the ELCA group that had been with them for a week. And it was a great celebration!

When I went back to the hostel with the group that night and listened in on their evening devotions, the main topic of conversation was about the party. And they all shared about what a wonderful experience it was for them.

But one of the participants looked at me and asked, sincerely, "How do we pay them back?"

³ https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf20042e4/karoline_lewis_grace_upon_grace_love

And I said, “You don’t. You’ve been giving to them all week. This is their chance to give to you.” And notice I didn’t say, “give back” because that wasn’t what it was about.

The extravagance of Christ’s love given and received that week went both ways.

When we give and give and give, the power dynamic is out of balance. When we only give, even from a place of Christ’s love within us, we hold ourselves in a position of power over others.

But when we receive Christ’s love from others, we recognize their solidarity with us as Christians. We honor their value, their worth, their integrity, and their dignity. It’s a vulnerable position because it makes us aware that we are in just as much need of receiving Christ’s love as anyone else.

But from that position, it becomes a relationship instead of just a transaction.

Serving in true Christian love means understanding that the person across from you or next to you has as much love to give you as you do to give them. Because the abundant love of Jesus didn’t stay contained within him.

It poured out of him in such a way that many considered it to be wasteful. But that wastefulness, that abundance of love, is what empowers us not only to give and serve out of that love, it also opens our hearts to receive it.

Thanks be to God! Amen.