

“Memento Vivere”

John 12:1-8

“An extravagance”! “A wasteful extravagance”!

You can almost hear Judas’ voice shouting out these words in Lazarus’ home that day, six days before Jesus would walk to his death. He was angry. He was beyond livid!

He verbally pummeled Mary, claiming that the alabaster jar of nard that she had bought could have been sold for somewhere around 300 denarii. Instead, she had broken and dumped the entire jar over Jesus’ feet, and the entire house was thick with the heavy perfume and would be for weeks or months to come.

Mary’s act will always be remembered as the most extravagant gift of comfort and loyalty Jesus would receive before his final ordeal –an act so extravagant that it would change the world for centuries upon centuries to come.

For Jesus’ entire mission has always been about extravagant grace, extravagant faith, and extravagant hope from an extravagantly loving God, whose faith in us by far exceeds humanity’s faith in God.

Mary, more than any other disciple present that day, understood this to the max. She understood who he was, what he was about to do, and why he was determined to do it. Her extravagant sense of holiness, worship, empathy, loyalty, honor, integrity would reassure her beloved rabbi in the face of his most terrifying last days. For she knew more than anyone: Jesus’ mission was never about the money!

“You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me,” Jesus calmly replied to Judas’. Jesus had other things on his mind –helping them understand that he would have to die in order that he can live!

As much as the disciples did not want to believe that Jesus would have to be killed, Jesus already knew and had prepared for that day. So did Mary, clearly the only one at the time, who did not deny Jesus’ words, but instead had the courage to celebrate him.

Mary, we learn, had bought the expensive perfumed oil for the purpose of Jesus’ burial. Yet she was inspired to anoint Jesus that day, to literally pour the heavy, sweet oil over his feet and massage it into his skin with her hair.

She knew what Jesus would endure. She understood and discerned from Jesus what the other disciples did not want to accept or believe. That he would need to die, so that he could rise again. And as a woman close to him, she planned to be part of his ritual burial rites.

Ancient Jewish burial practices, washing the body, known as “tahara,” and anointing it with oils and spices was a ritual of purification and allowed for a dignified departure on the part of the deceased. The ancients believed that the ritual purified the body and soul, soothed the spirit, and surrounded the body with God’s protective presence. It was also a sign of devotion and love on the part of the person who washed the body ritually for burial.

But why would Mary choose to do this six days before?

In her “pouring out” upon Jesus, Mary makes a statement so pungent and pure that it cannot be mistaken. Like the female protagonist in the Song of Solomon, oil is the smell of love that the Bride holds for the Bridegroom. Likewise, the Bridegroom delights in the fragrance of his “beloved.”

For Mary, he is her beloved Messiah, a word that means “the anointed one.” The fragrance of her devotion and love will permeate Jesus’ spirit, mind, and heart, and prepare him for the week to come, a week more difficult than any he could ever imagine.

Fragrances instill within us a memory of a time and place. Have you ever had a time when a certain smell of food wafted past your nose, reminding you of home or a dish that your mother used to make? Or perhaps the scent of fresh grass or something familiar in the air can take you back to a significant memory in your life, a wedding, a funeral, a relationship, a trauma. Our senses help us remember.

Jesus, in his most difficult moments, will remember this act of devotion and worship, comfort, and love, and I imagine that Mary’s extravagant empathy will reassure him that the human spirit is capable of great loyalty and love.

That day, Mary did not want to anoint him when dead but to consecrate him while alive, to declare her love, confirm his call, and prepare him for his mission, the most difficult he will ever undertake.

For all who witnessed her act that day would not only remember her unusual service, but the scent and reminder of the “messiah,” the “anointed one” would remain in Lazarus’ home for a long time to come, reminding them who Jesus was and of the promise that Jesus made a promise that his “memento mori”, death, would not be the end of his story, but only the beginning. This is what Mary understood, that through what he would endure, Jesus’ memento mori, death would become our memento vivere, life. She would make sure that she and they would not forget.

Just as perfume once released will infuse everything and everyone in its vicinity with its pungent scent –so too would Jesus’ promise of life. He may be missing for a while, but he will never be gone. The fragrance of his presence will always remind them of his lasting and important message and his eternal presence. He may die for a while, but he will rise again.

Mary may have prepared for Jesus’ death, but now she celebrates his messianic identity and promise of life.

And so do we still today. Each time we celebrate his last supper in our homes and in our churches, remember that promise and acknowledge the Holy Spirit of God that continues to dwell among us.

Our celebration today is the ultimate evocation of Christ’s invocation, a commemoration and inspiration of the enduring love of Christ in us, and through all generations.

As the fragrance of your faith wafts through the sanctuary today, as you partake of the Bread of Heaven and the Cup of Salvation, remember Christ, as Christ remembers you and promises you today:

Memento mori (remember that you must die).

But “memento vivere” (remember that you must live)!

Extravagant? Yes! Extravagant indeed!