

## March 21, 2021 | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [John 12:1–8](#)

TITLE: **Fragrant Faith**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

When telling a story, where you begin—how you start the story—affects everything else that comes after. Here’s an example. When I was growing up, we only heard about the early history of America from the perspective of the explorers who came to our shores or the Pilgrims who landed on Plymouth Rock. Everyone knew that Native Americans lived here, but no one said much about them—certainly not much that was positive. These biases shaped the way the whole American story was told; but these biases were wrong and dangerous. American history did not begin with Columbus in 1492 or Myles Standish in 1620. It goes back much earlier than that. Long before Columbus, people lived on both continents of the Americas—clustered in groupings in the Andes, Central America, the Mexican peninsula, and in North America. One of the largest cities in the Americas was on the banks of the Mississippi River, near modern day St. Louis; that’s where the ancient city of Cahokia was. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, there were more people in Cahokia than there were in London or Paris. In fact, in 1492, there were likely more people living in the Americas than there were in all of Europe. It makes a big difference whether you consider the American story as being about colonists arriving on a sparsely populated land, or a story about Europeans bringing guns and disease into a rich and vibrant cultural setting that led to a tragic genocide of the indigenous people. The assumptions you have when you start telling a story greatly affect what you learn from the story.

We will discover how this same dynamic is at work in the gospel lesson for today—the story about a woman anointing Jesus with costly perfume. Each of the four gospels tells some version of this story. In Matthew and Mark, an unnamed woman breaks in on Jesus while he’s a guest in someone’s house and anoints his head with fragrant oil. In Luke, a weeping woman seeking forgiveness anoints Jesus’ feet with perfume. In John’s version, the woman is now identified with Mary, the sister of Lazarus. And she puts the perfume on Jesus’ feet, not as an act of repentance but as an act of devotion. Jesus is about to enter the city of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and will soon face a time of trial and crucifixion. He was anointed that night by Mary as a way to prepare his body for his coming death.

Now staying with John’s story—we don’t know why everyone was gathered together that evening. Given that Lazarus had only recently been restored to life, maybe the dinner was a celebration—a chance for friends and family to shake Lazarus’ hand and meet the miracle worker from Nazareth who’d called him out of the tomb. But what Mary did that night took real courage. In front of the entire gathering, the people squeezed into their Bethany home, Mary walked up to Jesus, knelt down, poured expensive nard perfume over his feet, and dried it off with her own hair. It was a very sensual and public act of devotion. No one could miss it; the smell of nard literally filled the entire house.

Now as the story continues, Judas objected to Mary's act of devotion. In this passage, Judas is called a thief, one who helped himself to the common coin purse used by the disciples. Seeing what Mary has done, Judas loudly objects—claiming her actions were wasteful and the perfume should have been sold to benefit the needy. Judas is a follower of Jesus as a means to an end; perhaps hoping Jesus would lead the people in kicking out the Romans or motivate the people to better fund social welfare programs. Mary was a follower of Jesus out of love and devotion for him alone; she loved Jesus the wise teacher, the gentle counselor, the good friend who literally had brought her brother back from the dead. Mary had said nothing, but done a lot. Judas said a lot, but had done nothing. Ouch! Judas called attention to himself, but it is doubtful little resulted from his interruption. But everyone in that house smelled and noticed Mary's loving action – and the memory of her quiet deed lingered that night and would be a blessed remembrance during the hard days soon to come.

Clearly the writer of John's gospel wants us to contrast these two disciples: Judas, the self-righteous, self-important hypocrite, and Mary, the self-effacing, self-giving follower. The story is told in the bible so that we will ask ourselves: "*Which disciple should be my guide as I strive to follow Jesus?*" Mary is clearly the better candidate. But now back to my original remarks. What are the assumptions setting the stage for this gospel story of a woman anointing Jesus with expensive perfume? There's a problem of gender roles present in these stories. Think about it: the unnamed woman in Matthew, Mark and Luke, even the named woman, Mary, in John's gospel, are silent in these stories, bowed down in postures of subservience. Meanwhile, the men in the story, particularly Judas, are assertive, speaking up, boldly stepping into the spotlight.

Are there any bible stories of men anointing Jesus' feet? No. There are a few men who fell at Jesus' feet with special requests—like when Jairus, the leader of the synagogue knelt before Jesus asking him to heal his daughter (Luke 8). But only women adopted this posture of subservience; and if that fact doesn't disturb us, it means we're still working from a flawed assumption that such was the proper role for women. Men called out for Jesus' attention; women came in silently, behind him to anoint his hair with oil or kneeling at his feet to wipe on perfume with their own hair. The fact that this gender imbalance was a real and problematic thing is seen in the fact that Jesus flips the assumption on its head when, in John 13, he is the only male in the entire New Testament to kneel down at others' feet—when he lovingly washed his disciples' feet as an act of true servanthood. If we hope to combat misogyny and counter the gender biases imposed on women every day, then it is important to challenge false assumptions whenever such details emerge, even in our own scripture.

But here's where Mary is so exceptionally wise and her example is worth following by us all. Built into almost every aspect of that gathering in Lazarus' house were social biases and injustices, hierarchies of power and expectations that women were second-class disciples. There were those who served and those who were being served; seats of honor and work stations in the kitchen; presences known through words loudly spoken and presences barely noticed because of silent humility. But stepping forward before the gathered group, in front of Jesus the guest of honor, interrupting whatever else

might have been going on—Mary generously anointed Christ’s feet with expensive perfume. The scent was inhaled by every nostril; the aroma filled the house. And Jesus blessed her for her fragrant faith. Mary’s story is remembered when so many of the stories about men have long been forgotten.

If we’ve learned anything from this extended Covid pandemic, it is the simple fact that all of life is interconnected. One virulent virus has affected work, schooling and travel the world over. It has crossed borders with ease and disrupted everything from baptisms and weddings to funerals. It is a healthcare crisis, an economic crisis, and a social justice crisis. When discussing this topic, the false assumption is that we only need to talk about epidemiology and vaccines. But the reality is that we have to talk about lots of things: gender issues—since women have been disproportionately affected by the layoffs and extra childcare and educational duties. We have to talk about racial issues—since communities of color have seen their life expectancy decrease two or three times more than white communities. We have to talk about housing injustice, technology gaps in our neighborhoods, food insecurity because children no longer have access to subsidized school meals, and so much more.

Given the complexity of these issues, we are tempted to accept partial answers – “let’s just do one little thing here and not worry about the bigger things over there.” But instead we need to follow Mary’s example of “fragrant faith.” Mary stepped forward with an act of unbidden love—caring not what others thought, but honestly seeking to show her devotion to Christ. Mary stepped forward with an act of great generosity—weighing not the cost, but doing as much as she could in that moment. And Mary stepped forward with a fragrant offering that permeated the house, that reached every person present that day, and that lingered in their memory for days and weeks and (through scripture) literally centuries to come. Her act knocked down prejudices about women’s roles. It shredded shallow arguments about pennies spent for utilitarian charity when bold generosity was needed right then. Mary allowed one act to be used by God in ways far beyond her imagining. It set the stage for Jesus’ coming trial, not with despair but with beauty and love. It elevated Jesus from a humble social worker to the anointed Son of God and Messiah. And it challenges us to find a place for us to pour out our perfumes, our fragrances and resources so that they may serve God’s purposes in the world today.

The assumption that Mary did a quiet, humble act of feminine piety is dead wrong. Mary showed true courage that inspires us to go and do likewise—trusting in the Lord who sends forth our fragrant offerings where God will, wafting over and through walls that divide, wrapping around souls in need and bodies in pain, both in our homes and community and far beyond this place and time. So act boldly, after the example of Mary with her fragrant faith—and trust that God will use your deeds of love and service for the healing of the world.

AMEN