

**“New Life: A Threat to the Status Quo” based on John 12:1-11 and Isaiah 43:15-21
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on April 3, 2022, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

Like our gospel reading last week, our text today is about a family that encounter’s God’s love. And like the parable of the Father’s love for the prodigal son and his brother, we see two very distinct reactions to this unconditional love. But to see this, I want us to step back a moment to see the big picture and then narrow back in on what is happening in today’s text. To do this, we are going to look at who Mary of Bethany is.

Now, this Mary who anoints Jesus’s feet in this text is not Mary Magdalene. While some in the Middle Ages confused them, early church and modern scholars do not. You see, just a little bit before today’s reading, John introduces Mary, and he does so by pointing forward to this moment, foreshadowing it. John describes Mary as being from Bethany, the sister of Lazarus, and the one who anointed Jesus with perfume, and then wiped his feet with her hair.

You see, Mary was among, if not the, most common names for women in Palestine back then. John adds these extra details to distinguish Mary of Bethany from the other Mary’s he writes about: Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mary the wife of Cleopas, and Mary Magdalene. Perhaps he was inclined to do this, being that his name was John, another very common name for men in Palestine at that time and today.

Likewise, we should make clear that Mary is not the sinful woman from Luke’s gospel, who also anointed Jesus and used her hair, but in that story, she wept and used her tears too. Now to be clear, John has this thing. He has no problem calling out people for their sins throughout his gospel. So, if he has no issue talking of people’s sins, so, if he left that out here, there is no reason to add that this is the same woman from Luke’s gospel. It’s not as if John just forgot.

So, then, who is Mary of Bethany, what do we know of this woman? Outside of John’s gospel, Luke does mention a Mary and a Martha, and I believe this is the same Mary and Martha. After all, John’s gospel does give Mary of Bethany a sister named Martha. Interestingly, there even seems to be a reference to Luke’s story about them, when John in today’s text John goes out of his way to note that Martha served the dinner. Remember that in Luke’s gospel, Martha serves the people, while Mary sits at Jesus’s feet with the disciples as a rabbi’s student would do, in a place of honor. And like that story, Jesus defends her, for choosing to love him first, over an act of service.

Mary is the one who challenged Jesus for being late, when Lazarus died a few days earlier. She wept in front of Jesus, drawing the tears of the crowd around them, and so it was with Mary of Bethany, with whom Jesus wept also at the death of Lazarus. Jesus cries not only because God weeps with us because of death, but also because he has compassion for his friend, who endured the loss of her brother, who would be alive, she believed, if Jesus had arrived earlier.

Martha had also challenged Jesus, but she did so differently, with a confidence from the outset that this moment was not the end for her brother, even if she was looking only to the resurrection on the last day. She is comforted by Jesus’s presence, knowing his powers, even if

he were not to use them to raise her brother. She is a pillar of faith for us all to marvel at. But Mary, who sat at Jesus's feet to learn from him, is like us. She struggles with her emotions. She believes Jesus could have saved him but grieves that he didn't. She knows who Jesus is and sat at his feet for knowledge of him and how his plan is bigger than this moment, but still her emotions peak when she faces this crisis. She struggles like any of us would.

And so, Jesus raises Lazarus and immediately, there is a plot to kill him, and it goes to the top. The high priest Caiphas himself is said to have said, "It is better to have one man die, for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." This is a practical statement about the need to kill a revolutionary, to cut off any threat to his power. A revolutionary, even a religious one, is a threat to the nation and the people because of Caiphas's deals with Rome. You see, high priests were appointed by Rome, and kept peace. He knows that any threat to his power jeopardizes this, meaning Rome could destroy their temple. But is also a foreshadowing, to Christ's death being one man, dying for the many.

And so, with this backstory, we see that the Mary who anoints Jesus's feet today. She is responding to the raising of her brother, who was dead, but has come back to life. Like the father rejoiced for the prodigal, so too she is rejoicing for her brother. She is without a fatted calf to slaughter, so she takes her most valuable possession, about 12 ounces of spikenard, valued at almost a year's wages, and fills the room with it, anointing Jesus's feet, and wiping them with her long hair.

Like the older brother in the story of the prodigal, Judas objects to this response. Judas thinks the money could have been spent on something better – helping the poor, and in some respects, he's right. Though John questions Judas's actual motive and accuses him of being a thief. Jesus defends her, reminding Judas that this wouldn't have ended poverty, not even if all the proceeds had gone to one person, but it was impactful for all, nonetheless. This comment is not an economic policy statement you see, like some have abused this quote to downgrade the importance of helping the poor. No, it is a recognition that this moment was special – it was something unique and worshipful, that prepared Jesus for his death to come.

What's interesting to me is that in this moment, John describes a movement that is growing. Many of the Judeans who had come out to mourn with Martha and Mary, were now, because of Lazarus being raised from the dead by Jesus's love, committing to following Jesus and stepping away from Judean leaders. Later, after Jesus enters Jerusalem, these people keep testifying, telling everyone of the wonderful thing that Jesus had done.

But like our text from Isaiah, we know that what has been done is only the beginning. We know this, not only because we have read to the end and know Easter is coming, but because Mary's actions foreshadow what is to come – Jesus's death – the moment when the Son of Man is lifted up on the cross, just as Jesus had predicted earlier in John's gospel, foreshadowing the coming Kingdom and inauguration of a new creation.

Mary's anointing is done in gratitude and done in the Spirit of Isaiah's text, pointing to what is to come, the new thing that God will through Jesus. But the world they were in and the one in

which we still live, sees the raising of Lazarus as a threat – it shakes the status quo. The dead are supposed to remain dead. Raising Lazarus to new life is a wild card to the existing powers, and it shakes them.

Likewise, the world sees renewed and restored believers who are enthusiastic about God's amazing love and grace as a threat. This too shakes the status quo – the complacent are just supposed to remain complacent. And so, the world we live in loves to emphasize its judgement and sin, the power of death, to keep those with faith in Christ from changing the world, moving the needle, and sharing in God's active ministry of reconciliation.

You see, the world is more comfortable with yet another faith that requires its people to earn their way. But grace and forgiveness and being a missionary of light and renewal like we see in the Judeo-Christian faith, is a challenge. A rules-based religion like they had in the pagan cults where right action appeased gods and brought right results, means people are tied to culture, practices. But a faith that is meant to change people, threatens the world in its order.

This is why this legalistic pagan influence on Judaism and Christianity is so contrary to God's word. After all, it is far different to believe that we have to earn our way to God or many gods, than to believe that the One True God came down to share in our humanity, was humbled to live in our limits, die on a cross for us, and then rise again to new life. But what's more, this True God – Father, Son and Spirit – is offering us this life, by making us temples for the Holy Spirit, individually and corporately, so that we might share in God's work, empowered by God's presence, in a ministry of reconciliation to change the world.

Grace is not something that is cheap and meant to just keep us as we are, but rather, grace like we see in the gift of our Lord Jesus, is meant to change us. It is intended to shake up the status quo, where we value our own accomplishments, moral purity and superiority. It is intended to empower us to be part of the solution in the world and make it a better place, one step at a time.

I'm tired. Clearly. We all are tired. This world has enough to tire us out already without adding to our list the need to earn God's love. No, if we know that we are loved, this can energize us and lift us up. Mary, I'm sure, was tired. Her brother had died. All these people were in from out of town. In her grief and brokenness, she was weak. But God's love energized her, and she stepped up to take what she had of most value and dedicate it anointing Jesus with a fragrance that filled the room, making what was stale, fresh again. How can we refresh our world?

Everything we do, as the kids have been learning about, can be done to let our light shine, not as a means to earn God's love, but in response to knowing that we are already loved. God loves us. The world would rather us think we have to earn our way to God. It's threatening to the world for us to act empowered and refreshed. The world wants us to draw battle lines, like Judas does in our text. The world makes it about winning, destroying our opponent with the ultimate argument, like we do so often in social media to defeat each other.

But what if, instead, we had a grace that restores. One that does not try to win or defeat our enemy, but instead is faithful to God's call on our lives to reconcile people to each other and to

our God. How much different would this world be – if we laid down our desire to beat each other up and picked up God’s desire for us to lift each other up? What if instead of looking to the past, we looked up to see that God is doing a new thing?

This is the time. This is the moment for us. As we head into the week before Palm Sunday, then Holy Week after, and then ultimately the season of Easter, this is the moment for us to know that God has been faithful to us, but also look forward because God is doing a new thing always. We look forward to the resurrection and the new life that is to come, both now and eternally, as new creations in Christ, called to share in God’s work to change the world. Amen.