

A Fragrant Offering

A curious word started popping up a few years ago on social media and in the conversations among young people: “YOLO,” y-o-l-o. If you’ve not heard of it, that is, if you are older than 30, it’s an acronym for “you only live once.” It became popular, “went viral,” after it was featured in a song by rapper “Drake,” encouraging people to enjoy life without overthinking the consequences. For instance, “Called in sick to work today. Headed to Cancun for the weekend....YOLO.” Called the “carpe diem for stupid people,” the catchphrase has been used to justify impulsiveness and unnecessary risk-taking. As the Huffington Post wryly observed, “yolo” often accompanied activities that “should have made any responsible friend and/or Twitter follower call the cops and/or a medic.” Such as when your friend writes, “I’m gonna go smoke poison ivy and see if my lungs get a rash. yolo!”

While not as severe, something like “YOLO recklessness” seems to be what Judas accuses Mary of in this morning’s Gospel lesson. Impulsive, not thinking of the consequences, Mary poured a pound of expensive nard perfume, worth a year’s wages, all over Jesus’ feet and onto the floor. It was rash, foolish, wasteful. She should have saved it, Judas insists, or, better yet, sold it and used the proceeds for the poor. Think of all the loaves and fishes we could buy! It was an impetuous, thoughtless act, and for what? Stinking up the whole place, making it smell like a cheap prostitute!

Now, Judas may not have been exactly earnest in his protests, as John points out, but many of us would concede that Judas has a point. The perfume could have been, *should* have been put to a “better” purpose—like helping the needy! That said, what probably bothers us more about Mary’s action is the extravagance itself. Many of us grew up being taught that excess in itself is wrong. And we carry in us the sense that extravagance is indeed wrong, obscene, offensive. Like fancy restaurants that charge \$400 for a nine-course ‘tasting’ meal; or premium plane tickets that include an inflight shower; or the concert in Florida last month that offered VIPs in attendance a \$400,000 champagne menu. We see excesses such as these and we are repulsed by them, by their wantonness.

There are other times, though, when extravagance is actually beautiful, and true, even if it is spontaneous and not thought-out, as was the case with Mary in today’s lesson. Mary—out of love, out of devotion, out of gratitude for raising her brother Lazarus from the dead—takes her most prized possession, her most valuable treasure, breaks it open and pours it over Jesus. She doesn’t send him a gift from Amazon. She doesn’t have FEDEX deliver it. She literally *throws herself* into the offering, falling at the feet of Jesus, anointing them and drying them with her own hair. Talk about excessive! A more effusive, more extravagant, more over-the-top act of love, you’ll likely never see. And the fragrance of her offering filled the entire house, permeating every nook and cranny.

It's a beautiful act. But there's more to her action than extravagant devotion. For whatever Mary thought she was doing, and whatever anyone else who was present thought about it, Jesus took it as something more, as a *prophetic act*, a sign, something whose meaning pointed beyond the moment, that spoke a truth that wasn't plain to those who saw it—namely Jesus' imminent death.

To pick up on this, you have to consider that Mary might have used the perfume to anoint Jesus' head, as Jewish kings and priests were anointed. Had she done that, everybody would have then gotten the message that Jesus is the new, anointed King, who is coming to liberate all of Israel, because many expected the Messiah to do just that. But the fact is, Mary did not anoint Jesus' head. She anointed his feet. Anointing someone's feet had nothing to do with kingship or priesthood. Rather, it was something you do to prepare a body for burial. Family members would rub sweet-smelling oil on the body, tenderly washing and caressing their loved one, as a sign of love, honor, and preservation. This, Jesus tells us, is what Mary did—she prepared him for burial.

Now, to suggest this at this time, in the middle of dinner with his friends, in the midst of celebrating Lazarus' return from the grave, would have been rather jarring. Imagine the scene: The disciples were all reclining at the table, letting their dinner settle. The wine was flowing, the conversation convivial. Then Mary cracks open the nard and the whole place is filled with the fragrance. Everyone is taking in the pleasant odor. That's when Jesus drops a bomb concerning his death. If this had been a movie, you'd hear the record scratch and everyone become uncomfortably quiet. Death...burial...what are you talking about, Jesus? We're having a party here!

It can seem unseemly, inappropriate, even unfair in the midst of life's celebration to bring up death, Jesus' or anyone else's. But the truth is, even on the finest of evenings, the odor of death lingers over our lives. We generally try to not to think about it, we ignore it, hiding death behind the facades of funeral parlors and hospitals and nursing homes. Some though take a more active role, fighting against it, by seeking to "live in the moment," doing things which are aimed at "defying death" but which seem sure to hasten its arrival, because "you only live once." But what our efforts amount to is little more than a perfuming over the stench, covering but not removing the odor.

Mary's act of anointing Jesus' feet, though it involves perfume, is not like that. The perfume that she pours out doesn't cover over Jesus' imminent death, but rather reveals it. Indeed, it is a symbol of it. Jesus, you see, is the bottle. And as such he will not be held back, to be kept and admired. The precious substance of his life will not be saved. It will be opened, offered and used, at great price. It will be raised up and poured out, emptied to the last drop, for the life of the world.

Too often *our* instinct is to hold back, to not give fully of ourselves, because we are afraid that we won't have enough left over when we are done. We have to conserve our energies, we tell ourselves, doling ourselves out in little bits, lest our resources become depleted, lest we run out in the end. But what Mary's act *and* the example of Jesus' life show us is that being emptied, spent is the point, it's what we are supposed to aim for.

For, on your deathbed, looking back on your life, what would it mean for you to have lived a “good life,” but to be able to say that you gave it your all? Would it matter as much whether you made your fortune, achieved your ambitions, left you mark, as it would knowing that you gave all of yourself while you lived? You may not have gotten everything right, you may have fumbled a few times, but you left it all on the field. You didn’t hold anything back, out of fear or greed or jealousy, but poured yourself out, gave all of yourself, to your family, your community, your church, your God. That not only your donations but even your career was an offering, because you labored not for wealth or recognition or security, but in the service of others, whether that was in direct service or in the service of an ideal—justice or knowledge, art or the public good. Is there any better way to leave this life, than being empty, spent for the sake of others?

The alternative is to be like Judas and hoard our life, bottle it up, trying to hold on to it, keep it for ourselves. That is no way to live, not really. And worse, we risk spoiling, going bad as we wait.

C.S. Lewis, reflecting on Mary’s offering, describes our choice this way: “The alabaster jar which one must break over (Christ’s) holy feet is one’s heart.” But, “the content becomes perfume only when it is broken. While they are safe inside, they are more like sewage.” Perfume or sewage, sweet or sickly, the fragrance of life or the stench of death...it depends on whether we hoard it for ourselves or we give it away.

Now, we may not like thinking about the odor we give off, but the fact is that we all smell, some better than others, more pleasing to some than to others. And this is true spiritually. St. Paul in our first lesson likens Christians to the odor of a burnt offering rising up to heaven: “We are the aroma of Christ to God,” he says, “among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.” It seems that the scent that we give off, the offering that we make of ourselves, has a way of blessing others, giving them life.

This makes me think of the old movie, *Babette’s Feast*. If you don’t know the story, Babette is a talented Parisian chef who is exiled from her native country on account of political persecution. She washes ashore in a small Danish fishing village, where the religious community is beset by fractious bickering. The once tight-knit band of believers has taken to snipping and sniping at each other, to the heartbreak of the spinster sisters who head up the community. The sisters take in Babette as a scullery maid and cook, but ask her to prepare only the blandest of foods—boiled dried fish and ale bread. Hardly the *haute cuisine* Babette was used to in Paris, but that was what the sisters insisted on eating.

But then one day Babette finds out she won the lottery in Paris. She offers to cook a true feast for the sisters and their whole community. They agree reluctantly, and Babette goes to work, creating the menu, ordering the needed supplies, and preparing the food. A week or so later the townspeople are treated to a feast of rare delicacies, excellent vintages of wine, and just some of the best gourmet fare anyone in the world could ever wish for. The religious community has no idea what they’re eating and yet over the course of the meal they find their community renewed.

Arguments are dropped. Misdeeds are forgiven. And when the evening is finished, they join hands and sing the Doxology under the stars.

Only later do the sisters discover what Babette had really done: she had spent all the money she had won, not just a portion of it, but all of it, on them. She had poured herself out on the sisters and their community, and she had nothing left. But the community was restored and given new life.

That is the amazing thing that happens when we give fully of ourselves, when we pour ourselves out for others. In offering ourselves, our all, we often find that we have in the end more than we started with, as God takes our offering and transforms it, making it a vehicle of grace, healing, and renewed life in community.

That is precisely what we will see in a few days' time, when Jesus will make a pleasing offering of himself on the cross, his blood poured out for the life of the world. Right now, though, we are still here, taking in the perfume of Mary's offering, marveling in the extravagance and perhaps wondering what precious thing of ours is God asking us to break open and pour out as an offering to God. As they say, you only live once. So let us make our life as fragrant as possible. Amen.