
Grace Abundance

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Harkins
Lent 5 – Year C

One day in early summer, many years ago, I was home from college and visiting my grandparents at their small farm in North Georgia. Their small house was perched on a hill beneath a lovely grove of oak trees, with an open field off the front porch, and gardens to either side. My grandfather hung a hammock between two of the oak trees, and it was among my favorite places. On this particular day I recall dozing in the hammock after lunch, afloat on a sea of summer breezes and dappled oak leaf shadows, and smells from the garden, sung to sleep by the birds that my grandparents faithfully fed. As I awoke, the first image I saw was my grandmother's quilts, five or six of them, hanging on the clothesline nearby, airing out in the dear, sweet summer freshness of the country air. Although I had grown up with her lovingly crafted quilts, had slept beneath them on long winter nights, it was as if in that instant I saw them for the first time. Created from scraps of old ties, shirts, patches on patches on pants, and even the occasional vivid scrap of discarded dishcloth, they were ablaze with color and design, and appeared on fire in the summer morning sun, reflecting back a light that seemed to generate from each individual design, each carefully chosen, yet lovingly random addition to the whole cloth. These works of art, and I now realize that is what they are, were created of the ordinary bits and pieces of their lives—everyday scraps of common experience—and woven into a delightful, Incarnational narrative, a tapestry of care, and love.

Like the Gospel text for today, those quilts, even now as I hold them in my mind's eye, remind me of the abundance of God's love, into which we live during this season of Lent. Before that summer day I had never noticed—never really seen—those quilts for what they were, the lovingly crafted and redeemed tapestries of my grandmother's love of life, and for us, a reflection of her ability to create outward and visible signs of her imaginative gifts and graces to warm us, and delight us. So it is with Mary in today's Gospel. Every time she appears in each of the gospels, her compassion opens Jesus' heart, and the texts are informed by her gracious abundance. I am the father of two sons of whom I am so very proud, and I am so grateful for the men who have mentored, guided, and shaped me; teachers and professors, football and track coaches, priests and colleagues who served as guides on the journey. But I have also been profoundly formed by the lavish, abundant love of *maternal compassion*, the cardinal virtue of pastoral care, by women like my grandmother who have loved and cared for me. Compassion, the Latin root of which means “womb-ish” or “womb-like,” is a powerful image in today's Gospel text. And I believe that God's abundant love is like the nurture and care of the womb, where we are sustained and nourished, and from which loving embrace we are given life. So, Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, with whom she shares a home, embodies that generous, extravagant compassion in this text. We know that at least two times Jesus comes here for dinner, including today's story. The last supper is to be held here. And Jesus appears on Easter to the disciples in Mary's home. There is no other place in which Jesus appears as often as he does this one. But even more remarkable is the complexity of relationship he shares with Mary, how he so clearly cares for her, and in relation to whose actions he finds meaning, and solace. She sits at his feet among the men to be near him, and to learn from him. Her sister Martha complains Mary is neglecting the work of serving food and drink to their guests. Jesus defends her, saying *she has chosen the good portion and it will not be taken away from her*. Nor, it seems, will she be taken away from him. When her brother Lazarus is desperately ill, Jesus hears the news from his disciples, and takes the time to journey to their home. Lazarus dies before he arrives. Martha goes to him in the road with words of regret, even reproach, but also, resignation. Mary, though, runs to him and falls at his feet, bathed in tears, her sobs breaking his heart. And he, too, weeps—his tears brought forth by her compassion. His heart wells up in response to Mary, and for her, he rushes to Lazarus' grave, calling him with such spiritual power to “*Come Out*,” that Lazarus does just that. Now we read the tale of Jesus' arrival at their home six days before Passover. He will be their guest for a week. They throw a feast in his honor. Lazarus is there, resurrected just days

earlier. Mary brings out a jar of costly perfume, made with pure nard, we are told, and anoints his head, his hair, and then, using her own hair, his feet. All in the room are joined in an embrace of fragrance. And, we hear that Judas is angry and, as he says, the extravagance of the gesture bothers him. He declares the perfume could have been sold for a large sum and used to feed the poor.

Jesus protects and defends her. "Leave her alone!" Jesus says to Judas; "You will always have the poor, but you will not always have me."

There is no one else in the gospels for whom Jesus feels so tender, is so responsive, speaks so protectively, and with whom he chooses to be a frequent guest. We know the most astonishing of his miracles, the raising of Lazarus, for which miracle John says the authorities chose to kill him, was done for love of her. And according to Luke, Jesus declared she would be remembered always, for doing a beautiful thing for him, for anointing his hair and feet with her perfume. In today's gospel, we are treated to two different ways of being in the world; two examples of how one might confront scarcity. And as is so often true of the Bible, it contains wisdom for the ages. We humans are consistent down through history, and we see this in both the Pharisees—and eventually, the Roman authorities—who feel their fiefdoms threatened, and in the face of loss of control they choose to tighten their grip. By plotting to kill Jesus, they hope to stop their sense of helplessness in its very tracks by asserting what control they can. Mary, on the other hand, has a different approach. We don't know exactly what she is feeling when she slips from the table and kneels at Jesus' feet with a pound of expensive perfumed oil. However, her silence seems to speak volumes. In gratitude for her brother's life, in grief for her friend's life, perhaps in fear for what might happen in the near future, she is silent. So, instead of speaking, she lavishes Jesus with an absurdly abundant gift: perfume that would cost as much as a year's total wages. This is a profound gesture of abundance. John tells us that the whole room filled with fragrance as Mary anointed Jesus. In this little story, we see that there are at least two ways of dealing with our fears born of scarcity: we can seek control in ways that ultimately keep us in bondage, or we can give all we've got.

I confess that in some ways I understand Judas and his theology of scarcity. Many of us have probably been here before. We have found ourselves uncomfortable in the face of generosity, and criticized it in order to limit its power. We've also probably stood alongside Mary. We have allowed ourselves to give to our heart's content—to lavish our love on someone or something else—only to have our motives questioned. When this happens once we become vulnerable, afraid to risk it happening again.

Sometimes our culture—and perhaps our human nature—pressures us to only take measured risks, and of course, in many ways this is wise. But God calls us to love without counting the cost. As George Herbert, poet and priest, has said:

*Lord I have invited all,
And I shall
Still invite, still call to thee:
For it seems but just and right
In my sight, ...
Where there is all, there all should be.*
~The Invitation, George Herbert

Where is all, there all should be."It could be a brave new Lenten discipline to engage the final days of this season as Mary would: to love generously, because we can; to give life our impulse to give abundantly, just as God gives abundantly. This Gospel text is in fact, my friends, Jesus' anointing and preparation for death, the anointing for his burial. So here in this moment John is giving us a glimpse into what our relationship towards gratitude might be as informed by the faith of Mary. I am so very grateful for the example of my grandmother, whose quilts were outward and visible signs of her abiding love for her family. They covered us in times of joy and sadness, and the love they represented lives on in my heart—and I am sharing that with all of you, right now. It helps me to understand the extravagance of Mary's love for Jesus and, in turn, his love for us all. In her quiet and devoted imaginative quilting, my grandmother pointed to something larger than herself, just as Mary, in anointing Jesus, draws our attention to the one whom she anoints. I am so grateful for Mary's example too, for the gift of her extravagant and life-giving example of compassion, and generosity. She reminds us that Jesus is God's gift to each of us, right here, right now. It seems, dear ones, that in so many ways we are in a time of perceived scarcity and fear, and surrounded by the behavior to which these give birth. And yet, Mary's gestures here, and throughout scripture, gathered together like the redeemed and resurrected scraps of fabric in my grandmother's quilts, are an invitation to go

and do likewise. I think back across the years to that summer morning, and I know that my grandmother's love lives in my heart and continues to expand like the universe we inhabit, God's gift to us all. Just as our Eucharistic table is a place of grace, and compassion where even Judas would be welcome—and remember that he stayed for dinner—we find extravagant gifts of compassion and grace. Mary does not say a word in this text, nor needs to. Her gift is the anointing of Jesus, and her actions speak so much more than words could. As another Mary, another of my maternal teachers and mentors has said so well:

*Lord, I will learn also to kneel down
Into the world of the invisible,
The inscrutable, and the everlasting.
Then I will move no more than the leaves of a tree
On a day of no wind,
Bathed in light
Like the wanderer who has come home at last
And kneels in peace, done with all unnecessary things;
Every motion; even words.*

Amen.