

Lent 05 C 2019
April 7, 2019 :: John 12:1-8
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“The House of Affliction.”

“Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany...”

In the ancient Hebrew of the Bible, the names of places often told us what was going on in that place. For example, there was a town named Bethel, which means “House of God,” and it was called that probably because there was a special place of worship there.

And then, there was a town named Bethsaida, which means “House of Fish,” and probably because the people there made their living by fishing.

And then, there was a town named Bethlehem, which means “House of Bread,” and probably because it was a place that was perfectly situated to grow wheat, which was then made into bread.

And finally, there was a town named Bethany, which means “House of Affliction,” and perhaps because it was a place for the care of the poor, and the sick, and the otherwise marginalized.

And so, “six days before the Passover,” but only two days before he enters Jerusalem for the last time “Jesus (and apparently *some* of his disciples) came to Bethany...”

Bethany was the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, who were close friends with Jesus. Back in Chapter 11 of John’s gospel, when Lazarus was sick and dying, it was Jesus to whom Mary and Martha reached out. We all know the story: Jesus arrived days *after* Lazarus had died, and was already entombed. But Jesus raised him from the dead, and restored Lazarus to his family.

But now, in Chapter 12, Lazarus is doing just fine; he’s up and about, and enjoying the company. Martha is doing her usual thing, prepping and serving. And Mary’s still sitting at Jesus’ feet.

At some point in the story, Mary slips out of the room, only to return with a quantity of extremely expensive scented oil. And before anyone can react, she pours it over Jesus’ feet, massaging it in with her hands, and drying his feet with her hair. It was an act of such profound love and intimacy — and done in front of everyone — that it’s no surprise that someone would object. “Why wasn’t this perfume sold ... and the money given to the poor?” It’s Judas that’s asking.

And it's at this point in the story, where we can do one of two things. We can zoom in, and explore the differences between Mary and Judas. Perhaps we could compare the characters of Mary and Judas, and think about which one behaved in a way that was more pleasing to Jesus, as a way of reminding ourselves to do better.

Certainly, a good long look at what's wrong with Judas's objection, could be the thing that nudges us to examine ourselves. I mean, Judas misrepresents the content of his heart, and I think that, sometimes, so do we. That could be a fruitful path to follow.

It could also be helpful to think about the costliness of Mary's offering; she definitely goes above and beyond, and she does it for love. And those are two things that I am more likely to *tell* myself that I am doing, rather than *actually* do. There's some value in that course of study.

However, rather than zooming in, on the characters in our gospel reading, we could zoom out, and look at our gospel reading as a story about a place called Bethany — a place called House of Affliction — and see how the good news is being proclaimed in that setting. What would that line of inquiry look like?

Well, in that case, what we see is that, at the beginning of Holy Week (in Jesus's time line), we find Jesus in a household where there is both devotion *and* dissent. Where there is Sabbath rest *and* ongoing ministry. Where there is active service *and* relaxed fellowship. And, where there is a celebration of life *and* the preparations for a death. All of this, is going on in one house.

Under one roof, there is a place for Lazarus to bear witness to new his life, while Jesus contemplates his likely and impending death. There is a place for Judas to betray Jesus, while Mary tries to honor him. In one house, under one roof, hard questions are asked, motives are questioned, and piety and poverty are the topics of conversation.

Does that sound familiar? It should, because this is us! This is a description of the household of God. Think about it. In a matter of days, the Roman Empire and the Jewish religious authorities will join ranks to execute Jesus. And suspecting their collusion, Jesus could be anywhere, doing anything, but he chooses to go to Bethany. He chooses to go to the House of Affliction, and be in the home of his dear friends. And, because he makes this stop, we are given an opportunity to consider not just who we *are*, but also who we might *become*.

Because we too are the people who gather in the name of Jesus. We follow the one who came into this world through Bethlehem, through the House of Bread, and who went out of it through Bethany, through the House of Affliction.

And here's the thing: We who worshiped him in the manger, can now sit at table with the sick and poor. We who have known our faith to be the bread of life, can now visit the places where the leper can live, and the dead can live again. We who received the gift of God in the form of a baby, can now have our hearts broken open to receive the gift of God in the form of a suffering servant.

In one house, under one roof, we will keep the sacraments of love and gratitude, and offer it to Jesus as a sign of our devotion. And if we do that, he just might take our poverty, our afflictions, our disagreements, our not-so-pure motives, our sin, and our inability to get out from under the weight of death, and he will bless them. And if we're willing, he will transform us into a healing oil, that is poured out upon the wounds of the world.

And if we're willing, we must also know that it will be costly, and it will be difficult. Because Holy Week begins in Bethany. It begins in the House of Affliction. Both then, and now. Amen.