

“Brazen Beauty” by Pastor Leah Rosso
Isaiah 43: 16-21; John 12: 1-8
Lent 5; April 6, 2025

I recently heard author Glennon Doyle tell about the time in her life when she was trying to get sober. For years she had used alcohol as a way to numb herself, to avoid having to feel all of the pain of her life. And then one night at an AA meeting, a woman who had been sitting nearby pulled her aside and said to her, “I want to tell you something that someone told me when I started my journey to sobriety. The feelings can be so overwhelming. But they’re not overwhelming because you’re doing it wrong; you feel like crap because you are doing it right— being human is often painful; but it’s worth it. Keep feeling.” Glennon said she really only had enough courage to try it a little bit at a time, so she would roll herself into a tight ball in her bedroom and play one Indigo Girls song so she could practice feeling through the music. One song at a time; one day at a time. And in this way, Glennon found her way to sobriety and to a new life with all the feelings as well as health and joy within it. One song at a time, she was really saved by beauty— the beauty of the music that could open her soul.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, a Russian writer in the 19th century, once wrote that we will *all* be saved by beauty. Whether it be in music or paintings or poetry or on the stage or in the pattern of the waves on the shoreline, or in the faces of those around us, or the beauty in a compassionate act of kindness, beauty speaks to something within us that we may not even know is there, or may have taught ourselves to ignore. It opens us up and we begin to realize how much we needed to see it or to be seen by it. And then, in opening ourselves up, we begin to recognize that when we witness beauty in our lives our breath gets deeper; our feelings of connection to each other and to God grow stronger; and our soul is filled with hope.

The first time theologian and author Ellen Davis saw the St. John’s Bible, she wrote that the art and beauty of it stirred a question within her— the question of when is beauty a matter of moral urgency? And the answer to her question arrived just as immediately— beauty is always a matter of moral urgency. It is always needed. It fills us to the brim with God’s goodness and delight, showing us the way towards justice and offering us great hope.

Today’s story from the Gospel of John is a story of great beauty. Jesus is in Bethany, and he is surrounded by three great friends: Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Throughout the Gospel of John these three siblings show up often, and most recently in the text, they were all together weeping until Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. These are not strangers to Jesus, or mere acquaintances, they have been walking with him; facing life together; sharing meals and struggles and the long walks between towns.

These are some of his closest friends. And they recently faced death together, until Jesus, while weeping, brings Lazarus back to life. They have literally seen it all. And so, in an act of pure devotion and servant hood and love, Jesus' friend Mary brings out oil worth a year's salary, and begins to wash Jesus' feet with this precious oil. Some scholars think she sees more clearly than the others that he will die soon, and is anointing him for burial ahead of time. Others say she is anointing him as a kind of coronation for being Messiah and King. Mary doesn't say. But what is clear, is that this act of love is both completely awkward and absolutely breathtaking. It's a moment that will not be forgotten precisely because they are living in a time when the Roman government is cracking down on rebels; when the religious leaders are spreading rumors about Jesus; when they are facing such struggles daily while also experiencing God's Spirit moving in ways they had never known before. It's an ugly time and also a beautiful time, all mixed up together. Jesus has been preaching good news to the poor; he has been freeing the oppressed; he has been feeding the hungry and empowering those who felt disempowered. And here Mary, in receiving new life from her friendship with Jesus, turns and offers it back to him in this beautiful act of anointing.

Dostoyevsky went on to write that "Jesus was an example of beauty and he planted it in people's souls, so that through beauty they all would become [siblings] to one another."

And here is Mary, anointing Jesus with the oil that most likely she would've anointed her brother's body had Lazarus stayed in the tomb. In this anointing she is treating Jesus as her brother, as her kin— with their futures wrapped up together. Next week as we hear the story of Holy Week again, you will hear how Jesus pays it forward— washing his disciples' feet and telling them to do the same for one another. We will hear of the ways that the government is scared of Jesus' beauty and authority that lies outside of their control and decides to crack down on it. We will hear how Mary and the other women never leave Jesus' side, sitting at the foot of the cross, because they are kin— they belong to one another.

Of course there are other people in this story. Judas steps in and breaks the quiet; has disdain for the beauty; discards the generous feeling of the moment. He does all this by suggesting that Mary is somehow being inappropriate; that she is being wasteful; that there are so many more things that could be done with the money that the oil is worth. It reminds me a bit of the ways the Tempter quotes scripture at Jesus in the wilderness— the words sound reasonable; but they are focused on the wrong thing. He is missing the point entirely. Judas may understand the quantity of money that is used to anoint Jesus' feet, but he is completely ignorant of the value of what is happening. And unfortunately he won't realize how much he has missed out on until it is too late. This is the tragedy of this story— that when we hold back, when we try to control, when we act out of our fear and discomfort instead of leaning in to God's love

and grace and curiosity, we miss out on what God is offering us— how God is constantly inviting us to be filled.

This is God's invitation to us— to live as those who know we are loved and that God's love is meant to be shared. Judas calls what Mary does "a waste;" but extravagant love is not wasted. Extravagant love keeps on flowing when we keep on sharing it with one another. God gives abundantly and God never wastes— every seed is planted or eaten; every drop of water nourishes new life in all kinds of forms. Who are we to be stingy, when God is so generous? This is what we are anointed for— to live as those who have much to give because we experience God's generosity firsthand.

Last week we had a guest speaker with us, Sarah Augustine of the Tewah tribe who is also a Mennonite Christian. Sarah stood right here where I am and shared the long struggle of her people on this soil that was taken from them. She told us of laws and policies that have kept her people from being able to live fully. And then, after all of that, Sarah shared with us that from her point of view, we are all kin. And not just all of us humans, but the water is our kin too; the earth; the wild rice. And she invited us to join her in her hundred year plan to restore our communities as kin to one another. She stood right here and she reminded us that at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry he told us that he was anointed— anointed to preach good news to the poor; to recover the sight of the blind; to declare the year of jubilee when all land is returned. And she said, "Today I am anointed to do those things too. And today you are anointed to do these things too."

And her beautiful invitation spoke to a longing in my soul— a longing for us to remember that we belong to one another. Here is a vision of God's beloved community— for us to remember that we belong to one another. May it be so.