

C Lent 5 4.7.19

John 12:1-8

Focus Statement: Jesus is in your corner.

My best friend recently sent me a meme that made me laugh out loud. It was a pink text box on a background of leaves and daisies. Written in the pink text box in bubbly feminine handwriting was the sentence: "Behind every great woman is another great woman replying to her frantic texts in the middle of the night." This meme was perfect because frantic, spastic, late night texts and just a touch of co-dependency really is the description of our relationship. Friends, I have to say, there's nothing better than having someone in your corner.

There's a lot that can be said, that has been said, about our Gospel reading for this morning. About the intimacy of Mary's action, the cost of the perfume, Judas' challenge, and Jesus' remark about the prevalence of the poor. All those are deep, and powerful and real and challenging and important. But what really caught my attention this week was that what Mary is demonstrating to Jesus through this action is pure, unadulterated love. Mary is showing Jesus that he's got someone in his corner.

Today is the fifth and final Sunday of Lent; we're in the home stretch now. Next week is Palm Sunday, where we'll process in from the Social Hall with waving palm fronds and loud shouts of Hosanna to the Son of David, and then we'll plunge immediately into Judas' betrayal, Peter's denial, the trial before Pilate, and Herod, the sentence of death, and then death on the cross. Then next week we've got Maundy Thursday with the last supper and Jesus praying in the garden and the Good Friday walk to the cross, dark, and solemn, and

somber. Easter's coming, with lilies and trumpets and shouts of Alleluia. Resurrection, new life, is on its way. But before we get there, things are going to get dark.

Things are going to get dark, and let's face it, they've been dark. Lent does not present us with the fluffiest of bible stories, these past couple weeks have been some hard hits. We've had Jesus' temptation in the desert, the lament over Jerusalem, repent or perish, the underachieving fig tree, and the parable of the two brothers, each selfish in their own way, and the father who only wanted to love them. We've found grace in all the stories, but it's been hard grace. The sort of grace that loves us enough to call us out, to take deep looks at ourselves, to be honest with our failings, and to force us to change. And that is grace.

Honest, hard, tough talk is absolutely grace. It's a phrase I use a lot, but I think all too often we mistake grace with niceness, and they are not the same. Niceness is passive; it allows the person being nice to keep their distance, to hold the object of that niceness at arm's length. But grace is relational, connected, close. Grace by its very definition is intimate.

The sort of tough, honest, in your face grace is grace because its corollary is the grace of this passage. A grace that is extravagant, exuberant, over-the-top, almost unnecessary in its elaborate display. A grace you can smell, touch, taste, as the rich heavy aroma of the perfume wafts through the building and out into the air. A grace as soft as tears, a grace stronger than death. A grace with no limits, no requirements, no obligations. Grace unmerited, unconditional, unbounded. Hard truth is grace because it is anchored in love.

This kind of unconditional, thinking the world of you, believing your future into existence love, is the kind of love Jesus had throughout his lifetime. We're in John's Gospel now, and in John we saw it before the world began, when "In the beginning was the Word," and "from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace." It was there at his baptism, when a voice from heaven declared, "you are my Son, the beloved, in you I am well pleased." We saw it demonstrated by his mother at the wedding at Cana, when Jesus told her, "My hour has not yet come," and she said confidently to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." And at the Transfiguration when the voice again declared, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him." Every time Jesus was at a turning point in his ministry, a place where the journey'd been long and the road felt hard, the Gospels tell us of these anchor points, these moments of sheer love, grace, trust, and acceptance, where someone came and declared to Jesus who he was, and whose he was, and exactly how completely unbounded was their love for him. Some of those moments we got to see, like the ones I listed. But others, I think, were more private. The Gospels all tell of Jesus drawing apart, away from the crowds and his disciples, to go off by himself to pray. I think those times of prayer were touchstone times, where Jesus could again be reconnected to the Father and grounded in the hope and the truth and the promise of his mission.

This Gospel passage this morning comes from just such a turning point. Jesus had just raised Lazarus from the dead, a move that set the chief priests and the Pharisees off and they began to make plans to kill him. We are six days before the Passover, just a day from the triumphal entry of Palm Sunday. Jesus' hour has almost come; things are just about to get really real. And Mary comes and gives Jesus this gift of pure, sheer love, of love so rich,

so expensive, you can taste it, love that hangs on the air, and catches in the fabric of your clothes, so that long afterwards, every movement releases the rich fragrance in the air, reminding Jesus in the long days and hours to come, that he has someone unequivocally in his corner. Someone who will stand with him when everyone else has failed. When Judas had betrayed and Peter has denied, and the disciples are in the locked room alone, Mary will be there, at the cross, in the tomb, fulfilling the promise demonstrated in this act of devotion.

And friends, that's Jesus' love for you as well. Because, guess what, you've got someone in your corner. Someone who pours out that same love for you. Who "in the beginning was the Word," "before I formed you in the womb I knew you." Who calls you beloved, who declares you chosen, who claims you as heir. Who died for you, so that death itself will be defeated. We've had tough talk all through Lent, and the talk's going to get tougher. Yeah, the world is big and dark and scary and painful, and when we're honest with ourselves, we've cause some of that fear, some of that pain. This journey through Lent and on to the cross is a journey of confession and repentance, it is about changing so that we can make change. But it is grounded in this promise. Jesus is in your corner. He is for you. He is on your side, on your team. No matter what. Thanks be to God. Amen.