Fifth Sunday in Lent (C) – April 6, 2025 Pastor Chris Repp
John 12:1-8 Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Lent is beginning to wind down now. We are in the final week before Holy Week, and our Gospel reading this morning is turning our attention in that direction, foreshadowing Jesus' death. Our texts so far in Lent have been helping us to appreciate the seriousness of our human condition and our complicity with the ways of the world that draw us from God, as our baptismal renunciations put it. There is a bit of that in today's readings too, but especially our Gospel reading this morning also moves us past the recognition of our predicament to fix our eyes on the way out – the resolution of our predicament in Jesus' death and resurrection, and the new thing that God is bringing to pass. To help us see how that works, I want to focus in turn on the three characters in this reading: Judas, Mary, and Jesus.

I want to start not with Mary though, as this story does, but with Judas. As soon as Judas is introduced here, John feels compelled to tell us that he will betray Jesus. But he doesn't stop there. He also gives us information that we don't get in any of the other Gospels: Judas is a thief; he steals from the common purse. This was the collection that Jesus' group took up to help the poor. When Jesus later tells Judas to go and "do what he is going to do," meaning, betray him, John says that the other disciples think Jesus is sending him to distribute the collection to the poor. So Judas' position as keeper of the purse explains his concern about Mary's use of costly perfume. And on the face of it, he is right that this perfume *could* have been sold and the proceeds used to help the poor. In another Gospel, Jesus tells a rich young man to do just that; to sell what he owns and give it to the poor, and then to come follow him. So this is a plausible objection that Judas has. Remembering the poor is an important thing to do for those who care about their relationship with God. But that's not the whole story. The sale of the perfume would also provide income for Judas, and it is really this, John lets us know, under the cover of a plausible, pious concern, that motivates him. His concern is not for the poor and not for Jesus. It is for himself.

The there's Mary, and the contrast with Judas could hardly be stronger. John doesn't tell us Mary's motives in her perfuming of Jesus' feet. Jesus does, though. I'll get to that in a minute. But before that, we have some hints at how Mary is the polar opposite of Judas. The first hint is from the Gospel according to Luke. Now I don't usually like to mix information from the different Gospels, because they are each doing their own thing without reference to one another. But John is something of an exception. John was written later than the others. He clearly knows the other Gospels, and he also seems to assume that his readers know them too. That's why I sometimes think of John's Gospel as the first Gospel commentary. So I think John might be making reference to that famous story of Mary and Martha in Luke's Gospel. That's the one where Martha complains to Jesus that Mary is not helping her with the meal preparation and Jesus responds that Mary has chosen to do something more important. She has chosen to sit at Jesus' feet – the place of a disciple – paying attention to what he says. This dynamic is borne out in John's Gospel. Our reading today comes in the chapter following the raising of Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha. In that episode, Martha meets Jesus when he arrives in Bethany, long after they had sent for him and way too late to keep Lazarus from dying. She and Jesus have an extended exchange about Jesus and the resurrection, but then Jesus sends for Mary. Those who go to her say, "the *teacher* is calling for you." And when she comes to Jesus, she kneels at his feet. Martha is the arguer; Mary is the teacher's attentive disciple. Both Mary and Martha

speak exactly the same words to Jesus when they meet him: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” But it is Mary’s weeping at his feet that finally moves Jesus to action, and he goes to the tomb to call Lazarus back to life. All of this sets up Mary as the one who is in the know about who Jesus is and what he is doing. She has been at his feet, paying attention. And now in our Gospel text this morning, here she is again, at Jesus’ feet, anointing him for his burial, and her wordless actions are given voice by Jesus. Within a few verses Jesus will be entering Jerusalem on his way to the burial that she is preparing him for. Again, the contrast could not be stronger between Mary and Judas; Mary’s lavish, selfless devotion on the one hand, and Judas’ self-serving stinginess on the other.

Jesus is the third character in today’s reading, and ultimately its focal point. Judas’ self-centeredness, however cleverly disguised, serves to draw attention away from Jesus. And not just his own attention, but Mary’s too, and by extension the whole of the community gathered around Jesus, as well as those who are seeking him out. There is great expectation about Jesus in the passages that come right before and right after our reading today. His raising of Lazarus has focused attention on him as someone who has the power of life in the face of death. He is a source of hope for people like Mary and the crowds of people who are looking for him. But he is also an existential threat to those who benefit from the world as it is, people like Judas and the religious establishment, who will collude to put Jesus to death on the pious pretext that they, and not Jesus, are saving their people from disaster.

The takeaway for us this morning, as we approach the focal point of the church year, is the crucial importance of people like Mary in connecting us to the death-destroying, life-giving work of Jesus’ death and resurrection, and the indispensable task of the church in following in her footsteps as disciples and witnesses in our own time and place. Mary’s lavish witness to these events anticipates John’s witness in writing it all down. And the reason he wrote it all down was so that those who would not be able to experience Jesus’ presence in the way the original disciples did, would nevertheless come to believe and trust in him as the source of life in the face of death, the source of goodness in the face of evil, and the source of forgiveness in the face of sinful self-centeredness. This, as I have said before, is the central and essential task of the church. When we pay attention like Mary, when we sit at Jesus feet, metaphorically speaking, when we take time and expend resources in observing and celebrating Jesus’ death and resurrection, as we do every week, and as will be doing even more grandly next week, we are stewarding the gospel and conveying Jesus to the world, laying the ground for the Holy Spirit to grab ahold of our hearts and attach them firmly to the one who is not only our teacher, but also our Lord and our God, as Thomas will come to confess at the story’s end.

But let’s give Judas his due, because I think there is a little bit of Judas in all of us too. He was right that we should be concerned about the poor. But he was using his rightness as a weapon in the service of another goal, his own personal agenda. Hearts attached to Jesus, on the other hand, are opened up to the world God loves in him and do not need to be scolded about that or diverted from their focus on Jesus, because that focus will lead them to love the world as Jesus did, caring for the poor and the despairing out of the abundance of God’s grace within them as an inevitable result of their focus on Jesus. It will become second nature.

May it be so for us. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.