John 12:1-11 New International Version

**12**Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. **2**Here a dinner was given in Jesus’ honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. **3**Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus’ feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

**4**But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him objected, **5**“Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages.” **6**He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

**7**“Leave her alone,” Jesus replied. “It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. **8**You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.”

**9**Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. **10**So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, **11**for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and believing in him.

“Revealing Anointing”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen

An echo of my time as chaplain at Blair Academy would have me greet you this morning with Ramadan Mubarak, or Blessed Ramadan. We had several Muslim students on-campus, and with today being the first day of the month-long fast that is the holy period of Ramadan, we would have been coordinating the kids’ early morning and early evening meals to accommodate their fasts. Of course we are not, in this church, gathered as people of Islam, we are Christians and seekers of a wide variety of traditions. Maybe, though, we might choose to consider for a moment that we *are* Muslim, when we understand that the word’s definition at its most basic means, simply, “one who submits to God.”

But even submission looks like a lot of different things, doesn’t it, and in a culture in which we are taught that holding power may be the single most significant goal worth attaining, any kind of invitation to submission must be suspect. This morning, we are invited to hear the story of different responses to the holy, and I want to share with you one of my own earlier lessons that challenged what I had previously understood. One of my undergraduate mentors, my advisor in the Religion Department, is a man named Jim Kodera. Jim was born and raised in Japan in a Buddhist household, but came to study here in the States, where he has remained for the past sixty or so years. I remember Jim’s ordination to ministry as a priest in the Episcopal Church almost as well as I remember anything of his lessons in class. One of the most significant things I recall, though, was in response to a question I asked in a more casual conversation. I wanted to know how it was that he, a Buddhist scholar, found a way to reconcile the different faiths in the world, when we read in John’s Gospel that there is “no way to the Father save through me {Jesus].”

I hope you might hear Jim’s answer as clearly today and with as much understanding of God’s love for humanity at its core as I did then. I am sure after almost 40 years that I am only paraphrasing, but the gist is this: “God has chosen to reveal Godself to humanity in different ways at different times. The historical Buddha would not have made sense to the people of first century Palestine in the way that Jesus of Nazareth would not have made sense to the people of India in the 6th century BCE.” That is a powerful statement, but still left me wondering about our understanding of Jesus as the Christ, our Messiah—our Savior—who is somehow one with God, but also a unique revelation of God, manifest as human. That is a mouthful, isn’t it? Yet, in this holy period of Lent, we are preparing ourselves to understand even more significant revelation of God’s love for us in the resurrection we celebrate at Easter. How do we appropriately respond to the ways in which God reveals Godself to us? Can we know for certain?

And oh, do we crave certainty. We want to know with clarity and with purpose, and we want to be right. But the things of God, or as we sometimes say, of heaven, are not anything we can know fully in this lifetime. Might you agree? And so, we carry on in the ways we have known to hold truth for us, and we are urged to love. The texts and laws of very major world religion agree on this. We are to care for one another. As Christians, we believe that Jesus taught us how we are to love one another, fully, faithfully, selflessly.

Do you wonder what the house looked like in which Jesus gathered with his friends? John tells the story of another family, maybe not too different from the one in the parable we heard last week that tells of some sibling rivalry and a parent’s best attempt to love fairly. Here, there is a division of labor in which Martha takes care of domestic tasks while Mary responds in a way we might call more worshipful. She anoints Jesus’ feet with most expensive perfume, having somehow understood that this man, this life saving man who loved her well in spite of her previous sins, was worthy of her submission and of her adoration. And then there is Judas. We know something of his character, with the hindsight that tells us he is one who betrays trust and everything we count as valuable. But what he says rings with a great deal of truth, too. *Shouldn’t* we take care of the poor among us? We might consider these two actions, anointing and charity, as two different ways of responding to God’s revelation of love. Some of us are inclined to praise and singing; some of us are inclined to serve; some of us move between the two with joyful abandon.

Today is the first day of Ramadan and is the Fifth Sunday of Lent. These holy days may seem incredibly distinct one from the other, but at the heart of both is an invitation to worshipful response to God’s gifts to us. One of the five pillars of Islam is *zakat*, or almsgiving; we can call it giving to the poor. Likewise, during Lent, Christians are invited to remember the poor, who are, as Jesus has told us, “always with us.”

At the Congregational Church in Camden yesterday, I attended a retreat based around the teachings of Henri Nouwen, a Dutch Jesuit priest who spent his live writing and in service to handicapped persons, living for a long time in a community setting in France. The program was led by Robert Jonas, who is known as Jonas, a friend and in some ways disciple of Nouwen. Jonas is also the leader of a community in Cambridge, MA called “The Empty Bowl,” whose members embrace Buddhist practice while also affirming faith in Jesus as Lord. While this may seem to some of us contradictory, I would share that understanding the gifts of different religious practices that guide us toward more loving, more grateful life may well be the “new thing” that God would do among us. I would like us to consider together as we gather for the sacred meal we name *Communion* that unity among God’s beloved creation must be God’s plan for us, mustn’t it? As we remember the breaking of bread and drinking of the cup that united Jesus’ followers over two thousand years ago, we remember our connection among all of God’s beloved. We may feel urged away from division and toward the unity for which Jesus himself prayed, “that we may all be one.” May it be so for us.