**On the Road to Easter**

Fifth Sunday of Lent

John 12: 1-8 4/6/25

Grace Rohrer

Prayer for Illumination

Holy God, just as you spoke at the dawn of creation, continue to speak to us now as we prepare to encounter your Word. Be with us in our listening, in our speaking, in our understanding, and in our responding. Amen.

This week’s headlines: On April 1st, Trump announced new tariffs, dropping a bomb on the global economy; nations are still struggling to respond, China declared retaliation, and global markets plummeted. Trump dismissed the National Security Advisor, and deadly tornadoes swept through the South and Midwest. In Myanmar, the death toll from the earthquake increased to 3,145 and is still rising. Brutal suffering has shrouded many people’s worlds in darkness, sorrow, terror, helplessness, and pain, and wave after wave of socio-economic and international turmoil continues unabated. Our prayers seem unable to keep pace with one disaster after another.

The season of Lent is gradually coming to an end. During this period of self-examination and repentance, as we slow down and let go, has it drawn us closer to Christ? Has devotional prayer and drawing near to the Lord helped us find peace and strength amid the storm?

Next week is Palm Sunday, entering Holy Week; may the Lord prepare our hearts as we journey toward Easter… anticipating this joyful day.

There is evil and suffering in the world and within us—no simple answers—but we believe that God has not abandoned us. The hope of the cross and resurrection will wipe away every tear, for the suffering Christ came to save for this reason.

God, through Christ in the world, is the life that began for Jesus in a stable and ended on the summit of the cross. He is the Lord of life in humility: He is the King who wears the crown of thorns, the Christ on the cross at Calvary’s summit—even wrapped in a tomb, passing through death and darkness; He is the living God in the realm of death. Christ has revealed Himself to us; He is always with us.

Dear brothers and sisters, on our way to Easter, the greatest feast in the Christian faith is not one without darkness and death. To reach the morning of the resurrection, one must pass through the painful day of suffering—Good Friday.

Through all the trials, troubles, loss of human dignity, even death and human failure that occurred—even as if Jesus Himself appeared to have failed—on the cross He once said, “Woman, behold, your son!” and “Behold, your mother!” He entrusted Himself to the people of the world, “Behold, your brother; behold, your sister.”

Today’s Gospel records that Mary supported Jesus through the most difficult moments of His life. She anointed Him and extolled His praise.

Mary understood; she saw that the dark shadow of the cross had already covered Jesus, so she prepared for His death. Her extravagant actions were not prescribed by the law of that time, nor were they the expectation of righteous conduct, charity, regulation, or demand—they were entirely out of love. She understood that time was urgent and limited. Although on the surface it seemed foolish, even wasteful, and though she was criticized, she still expressed her faith through lavish love and action—“doing some beautiful deeds for God.”

The fragrance was thick and heavy, so heavy that the entire house was filled with that scent. The Gospel of Mark describes this even more extremely, indicating that the testimony of Mary’s actions not only filled this house, but also filled the world (Mark 14:9). Mary’s actions and the fragrance were such that the world could not help but see them.

Today let us reflect together on poverty, and on the last sentence of today’s Gospel, where Jesus said, “You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

Jesus’ words quote from Deuteronomy, reminding them that caring for the poor is their responsibility, and that there will be other opportunities to do so. But Mary saw an important opportunity: if not done today, there would be no chance later.

Jesus said, “You always have the poor with you…” Who are the poor being spoken of? And what does poverty mean?

Perhaps we think that poverty is merely an economic issue. Perhaps it refers to those lacking resources on the other side of the city or the world; or perhaps, to us, poverty is like the faces of children in some fundraising photos. Or it could be the unemployed, refugees, or immigrants. Some people define poverty as not having enough money to buy food or pay bills.

I think that when most of us hear the last sentence of today’s Gospel, we think of those who are economically poor—understanding poverty solely in terms of the amount of wealth. This is not wrong, but it is not all there is.

Of course, Jesus was not saying that poverty is a hopeless condition for which we should take no action. He did not place Himself above the poor, nor did He force us to choose between Him and the poor.

He was very clear about His responsibility—and ours—toward the poor. He declared that His mission was “to preach the good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18). He said that we should invite the poor to our banquet (Luke 14:13). In the other three Gospels, Jesus said, “Sell all that you have and give to the poor” (Matt 19:21; Mark 10:21; Luke 18:22). The poor are the ones Jesus cared for most.

但如果只從物質財富的角度來理解貧窮就太狹隘了。貧困不只存在經濟，還有內心的貧困。耶穌談論的貧窮人包括你和我。

But to understand poverty solely from the perspective of material wealth is too narrow. Poverty exists not only economically but also as inner poverty. The poor Jesus spoke of include you and me.

Is it not sometimes the case that you have enough money to pay your bills—or even more than enough—yet you still feel empty, as if something is missing? And you know that even more cannot fill that void. This is inner poverty. No amount of money can solve this problem. It is not a matter of finances—it is about life.

Let us ask ourselves: In what aspects is your life abundant and fulfilling? In what aspects is your life lacking and in need? In what areas are you living a bankrupt life?

This is Judas’s situation. Every word and action of his revealed the bankruptcy of his life. He could not smell the fragrance that filled the house. The question he raised—“Why is this ointment not sold for thirty pieces of silver to aid the poor?”—was rooted in his own poverty.

He did not understand the meaning and significance of that moment, instead trying to quantify it. He was concerned with his external poverty rather than his inner poverty.

Consider what led Judas to raise this question. Hidden in a cloud of plausible excuses were concealed cold motives. Jesus saw clearly that Judas was using the pretext of caring for the poor or doing charity to justify himself, that those who, driven by selfishness and greed, accumulate personal wealth, were making excuses.

Mary Magdalene took one jar of the most precious pure nard, a precious scented oil, anointed Jesus’s feet, and wiped them with her hair; the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment.

This is the fragrance of Mary’s presence at that moment. When she offered herself—her all, everything she possessed—to Jesus, it was the fragrance of love. It was the fragrance of generosity and unreserved giving. It was a luxurious scent. It was the fragrance of vulnerability and openness. When Mary wiped Jesus’s feet with her hair, it was the fragrance of drawing near to the Lord. It was the fragrance of knowing that life’s fullness and meaning are contained in every moment—the fragrance that filled the entire house.

The beauty expressed here is not external material, but an experience in which we participate. Beauty connects us to the infinite, reveals meaning, and reminds us that we transcend ourselves and belong to a greater realm. Beauty can heal and transform life. It is not only about the eyes, but also about the heart.

When have you smelled a beautiful fragrance? In what way does it fill your house today? Is it the ointment you use today to anoint others and the world? If you cannot smell that fragrance today—if you cannot perceive the beautiful aroma around you—life is a kind of poverty.

Judas is the embodiment of that impoverished life. Judas’s nose turned a blind eye to the fragrance of life. He missed the beautiful aroma that filled the entire room. What then if the poor that Jesus spoke of are those who cannot perceive the beautiful fragrance?

This is not a criticism of Judas, but a diagnosis. I realize that sometimes, deep within me, there is a blind Judas. Sometimes I miss the beautiful fragrance in life. Whenever we do so, our lives become barren, and our spirits bankrupt.

We do not wish for you to live a life of poverty; we hope that we can feel the beauty of life, the beauty in one another, and our own beauty. This Lent is meant to awaken and restore the beautiful fragrance in ourselves, in each other, and in our world.

Look at the poverty in our lives, and then take a deep breath. If you have not yet smelled the beautiful fragrance, what is the reason? What might we need to do, change, or let go of?

Take a deep breath. Embrace beauty. Let it fill you, give you the courage to love unreservedly, and inspire you to take risks in facing vulnerability and intimacy. Let the beauty of your life illuminate the lives of others and drift throughout this world.

May we be encouraged to do for God some lavish, some daring, some exceeding, some great, and some extravagant beautiful deeds. Though there is suffering in the world, we still hold on to hope; this is why we generously give and build the church—without being in God’s house, even if we possess everything, we are still very poor. There is no place better than in the hands of the Lord.