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Hutterthal Mennonite Church

Psalm 126; John 12:1-8

3 April 2022

From Scarcity to Abundance

*Greeting/Opening Prayer:*

Let us pray: God of abundance, you have created this universe with so much potential. Forgive us, your broken image-bearers, when we fall prey to mindsets of scarcity, fearful that there will not be enough for everyone. Strengthen us to be generous with all that we have to offer our neighbors and our enemies. Inspire our creativity as we seek to live into the abundance that characterizes your kingdom, your renewed family. In Jesus name, Amen.

*Message:*

We have shifted this morning to the book of John. If you hadn't realized, we have been studying Luke's gospel since we started Lent. In our story this morning, the political stage has been set in chapter 11 just before this moment. The chief priest, Caiaphas, and the religious leaders of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish governing body, have decided that Jesus must die, especially after he raises his close friend Lazarus from the dead. According to John, many Jews from Jerusalem are witnesses of this moment in Bethany, which is a little less than 2 miles from Jerusalem.

Watching as the tides are shifting, especially as Passover nears, the Sanhedrin puts out a call for anyone who knows Jesus's whereabouts to turn him in. Jesus and the disciples flee the area for Ephraim, 12 miles north and a little east of Jerusalem on the edge of the wilderness.

When we begin our story in John 12, Jesus's group returns to Mary, Martha, and Lazarus's home in Bethany just 6 days before the Passover festival. I wonder if Jesus has received word from Lazarus that the Jewish worshippers from Jerusalem have returned to the city, which leaves much less risk in Jesus coming back to Bethany. Remember in chapter 11 that many people from Jerusalem come to Mary and Martha's home to mourn with them. Entirely unexpected by them, they become witnesses of Jesus's powerful work in Mary and Martha's family. I wonder too if Mary, Martha, and Lazarus are completely aware of the Jerusalem leadership's intention to arrest Jesus. Quite possibly, up to this moment when Jesus arrives with the disciples to eat with them, they have been warning Jesus to stay away, especially as the political tension of the yearly Passover looms.

I offer some of these theories or conjectures in preparation for our scripture text this morning because of how difficult to believe it might seem. Jesus is sitting at Lazarus's dinner table with the disciples. Martha is serving the meal, and Mary seems to be aloof. All that we know is that at some point during or after the meal, Mary brings quite possibly her most precious or one of her most precious possessions, a pound of perfume worth almost an entire year's wages for a day laborer. She pours it out on Jesus's feet and wipes his feet with her hair, a vulnerable, humble, and deeply loving act of devotion to the great teacher who not too long previously brought her brother back from dead. The perfume is so strong that the author of the gospel reports that its smell fills the entire house, marking this moment in each person's memory as they witness its intimacy. Not everyone at the table though sits in admiration of Mary's sacrifice and devotion. In fact, Judas cannot believe that she would waste such an item in this way because the perfume could have been sold and the money used on behalf of or given to the poor of the community. The author of the gospel gives us some clarity on Judas's intentions in this moment,

letting us know that Judas has little regard for the poor or marginalized. Judas sees and smells his chances of embezzlement drifting away slowly on the breeze that wanders through the house.

Jesus responds to Judas's criticism with stern rebuke: "Leave her alone. She has kept it for the day of my burial." First of all, we must realize that Mary is continuing a theme that extends all the way back to the beginning of this gospel, which is that it is those on the margins or the edges of society, the disposable, the powerless, and the outcast who see Jesus for who he truly is and what he has come to do. Mary joins those who really see Jesus: John the Baptist in the wilderness, Jesus's mother and the servants at the wedding in Cana, the Samaritan woman at the well, the blind man who receives his sight in Jerusalem, and her sister Martha, who is the first person, a woman no less, in John's gospel to identify Jesus as Messiah and God's son.

In our scripture reading this morning, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus have become suspect by the Jerusalem authorities because many Jews who had been mourning with the family believe in Jesus after witnessing Lazarus's resurrection. In this moment at the table, Mary sees how this is all going to play out and prepares herself for the grief and loss of the coming days. She has probably heard from those who had come from Jerusalem that the authorities are looking for Jesus. She also realizes that Jesus is determined to go to Jerusalem during the Passover festival, which is a wildly unpredictable and risky season in Jerusalem's yearly cycle. And so, Mary begins the grieving process, taking that which is precious to her and offering it to Jesus, anointing him for the work ahead as he continues to draw closer to danger, and preparing his body for the cruel and humiliating moment that awaits him. She sees where this is going to end up and prophetically responds with what little power and influence that she can offer. As we read in our Psalm reading, she dreams as the exiles once did of what could come if Jesus is truly Messiah and the world is truly turning around. Again, we are reminded that the one who would

have had little to no right to speak up about who Jesus was or what he was doing is the one who sees most clearly what is going to happen, something that Jesus's closest followers, his disciples, will continue to struggle to understand even after Jesus is arrested.

In light of the presence and promise of Messiah, then, Mary realizes that what the world values and finds important must be sacrificed and laid down at the feet of Jesus. The abundance of life in Christ, of life in the kingdom or family that the Messiah Jesus has been showing throughout his ministry, is worth far more than a rare perfume. I must confess though that my response to Jesus often looks more like Judas than like Mary. I think that I know better how valuable items should be used to further the mission of God in the world. Yet, even in this moment, I realize that when I criticize how such valuable items are used or not used, I have conceded to our culture, the world, or our government's systems of value and worth, which are not those of Jesus. Mary's devotion and revelation in this moment are worth far more to Jesus than Judas's greed, embezzlement, or even valid criticism. Jesus's response to Judas is deeply revealing. The poor, the outcast, the marginalized will always be a part of this broken world's attempts to build kingdoms because human selfishness, driven by fear of scarcity and not transformed by the Messiah's love and abundance, will leave people destitute in pursuit of what is supposedly valuable or worthy. Jesus knows Judas's intentions and meets him where he is by saying that as long as people continue to do what you are doing in stealing from the common purse and pursuing your own ends, then you will always have the poor with you, but Mary realizes where true value, worth, and abundance are found: at the feet of Messiah Jesus.

*Closing Prayer:* Let us pray: You have assured us, O God, that you make a path in the wilderness, a river in the desert. In the words of Scripture and the experiences of your people, over and

over again, the answer was always right under our nose, the provision was always there before we could see it. May we trust in the gifts that have been given. May we trust that they are enough, enough and overflowing to the point that they may pass through us like a river in the desert, like perfume over our Savior's feet. Even now, the fragrance fills the air. May we breathe deeply your abundance. In Jesus' name, Amen.