

April 6, 2025
Pastor Katherine Willis Pershey
“Just an Ordinary Dinner Party”
John 12:1-8

The dinner takes place after Jesus raised his friend Lazarus from the dead. The gathering could have been a funeral reception. Instead, it's a party. Because Jesus, after weeping outside the tomb, commanded his friend to come out. And Lazarus, dead already for three days, shuffled into the light. Recalled to life.

It's no surprise that the formerly dead man's formerly bereft sisters are ready to celebrate. They are bursting with grateful joy.

Martha served. We shouldn't rush past this. It is no small thing to serve. It's hard work. Good work. And we know from stories in scripture that this work sometimes felt like a burden to Martha. She might have wished her sister helped a little more. At the same time, she might have wished she could be a little more like her sister. I'm guessing she wouldn't be thrilled that two thousand years after she faithfully served Jesus and his friends, a book called *Having a Mary Heart in a Martha World* would sell over two million copies. She had a Martha heart for service, and that's why anyone had anything to eat at this dinner party. Let's imagine that before Mary cracked open the box of nard, the room smelled of bread and garlic.

But you don't notice the scent of bread and garlic anymore when the odor of costly perfume pervades a room. From now on, no one will be paying attention to Martha, quietly refilling wine glasses and cleaning up spills.

All noses are on the nard, and all eyes are on Mary. This woman just does not know how to behave at a dinner party. She doesn't keep her hands to herself and her big feelings to a dull roar. She cannot contain her love for Jesus. She must express her praise. She gets down on her knees and rubs her hair all over a man's feet. With a pound of perfume. So

much perfume it would cost almost a year's wages to buy it. If you get a headache in Sephora, you'd probably be fetal if you'd been seated at this table.

Most biblical scholars agree that Jewish women of this era would have almost certainly covered their hair in public. The only man that would see a woman's hair was her husband.

Mary has crossed so many lines at this point, including, of course, the line of wastefulness. Judas isn't having it. His point sounds reasonable - is this really the best use of resources? Of course, we know that Judas has shady motives. He wanted to hawk the nard and pocket as much of the profit as he could. Jesus will say that we will always have the poor. We will also always have crooks who exploit the poor.

I love that Jesus tells Judas to leave Mary alone. *Leave her alone.* That's a good Bible verse to keep in your pocket when you need it. I don't think it's been embroidered on pillows or plastered on wooden signs at Hobby Lobby, but surely, we all have moments in which we need to hear Jesus speak such words of care and protection over us.

But these words are uttered alongside words of woe and warning. *Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'*

This dinner party is hemmed in by death on all sides. It's happening because Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. And it's happening six days before the Passover, when Jesus will break bread at another table prepared in the presence of his enemy and his friends. The night of his betrayal, the night of his arrest.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. That's yet six days ahead.

We're still at this dinner party, with silent Lazarus, slimy Judas, scandalous Mary, and however many other unnamed guests long-suffering Martha serves.

Jesus is not long for this world, and he knows it. Mary's been keeping the nard for the day of his burial and she almost made it to that day.

My friend Mandy points out a practical detail of this story that had never dawned on me before. Mary anoints Jesus's feet a week before he is crucified – which means he surely still “reeked of [perfume] on the cross... [that scent] took him through that whole excruciating experience.”¹

Mary can't avert the crucifixion of her friend and teacher. She does not have that power. And yet she still finds a way to resist death with her brazen act of beauty and joyous act of worship. She still finds a way to infuse her love into the very pores of her Lord and Savior, so that even when the Roman guards carted him away, the scent of her devotion trailed behind.

The fragrance would have clung to her own hair as well, in the chaotic days that followed. As violence, cruelty, and death snatched everything good and holy from her fingertips and the face of the earth, Mary's hair smelled like Jesus's feet. Maybe the scent still clung to her roots when Jesus emerged from the tomb.

Last month I hosted a dinner party for a few local women who have also worked in ministry. There was no Judas present. Nor was there any nard, though I did light a scented candle. We had a potluck, so no one had to play the part of Martha. We hadn't consulted one another ahead of time and we ended up with an extraordinary amount of cheese.

¹ From Low in the Water: Benedictionary: Scent | with Mandy Smith, Mar 30, 2025
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/low-in-the-water/id1771125901?i=1000701507558&r=816>

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Maybe not a year's wages worth of cheese, but this is Wisconsin, so use your imagination. We also had an enormous amount of chocolate. I can't blame that on the perils of potluck, because I provided all of it. I don't think the pastoral artists who created the Full to the Brim series were necessarily thinking of cheese and chocolate when they came up with the theme, but that night was certainly an experience of grace. Only a year in a new city, and I have friends talking and laughing in my living room? Thank God from whom all blessings flow.

By the end of the night, our conversation drifted to the concept of joy mongering.

You've heard of fear mongering. But have you heard of joy mongering? It's the practice of seeking joy – particularly in times in which joy is rare and risky. As we named the places, we were seeing glimmers of joy in the midst of personally and politically harrowing days, I was filled to the brim with an irrational, holy courage.

The term "joy mongering" may be new, but the concept of subversive joy goes way back in the Black Church. The Rev. Adam Mixon writes, "As Christians, our joy is rooted in the living hope we have in Christ through the Resurrection... The joy that we possess is paradoxical. The joy that we possess is prophetic. The joy that we possess is public. The joy that we possess is also subversive, revolutionary. Our joy... is a matter of protest. My foremothers and forefathers sang, marched, sat-down, stood-up, and created under the oppressive strain of slavery, segregation, disenfranchisement, discrimination, and racism. It was the joy that possessed them that fueled their pursuits...[The poet] Toi Derricote defines joy as a resistance to disorder, cynicism, entropy, and despair. She says that this joy, "transcends reason"...Jesus modeled joy in public and under the most extraordinary pressure that any human being could ever encounter! His joy was a witness against wicked and corrupt powers who in their arrogance and ignorance condemned him to die! In His dying, Christ not only bore witness against the corrupt institutional leadership of

his time (both church and state), but He did so with a dignity and humanity that I believe was fueled by His love for us and the promise of joy.”²

And I believe it was also fueled by the glorious fragrance of his feet.

The truth is we are always hemmed in by death on all sides. We have always been in the clutches of disorder, cynicism, entropy, and despair. In this story - which can only happen because Martha serves - Lazarus is proof that these things do have the last word. In this story, Mary is proof that these things need not even have the second to last word.

She dismantles disorder by shattering the cage of decorum. She laughs at cynicism by collapsing into a posture of praise. She resists entropy by abiding the law to love God with all her heart and mind and soul and body. And she fights back against despair with excessive, pungent, subversive joy....I think we might need to do the same.

May it be so. Amen.

² Adam Mixon, *Joy as a Matter of Protest?* <https://mministry.org/joy-as-a-matter-of-protest/>