

Sermon – John 12:1-8; Isaiah 43:16-21
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Grace Lutheran Church
5 Lent – Year C
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“Olfactory Hues”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Opening Day is a holiday. That’s how my new t-shirt reads, anyway. Of course, the shirt was purchased after I’d claimed the holiday. Anders and I were playing hooky on Friday at Wrigley Field, “suffering” in the cold as we took in the Cubs and the Padres. It was a great game and the Cubs ended by flying the W. It was also a day of pomp and circumstance, kicking off the new season in style. Ryne Sandberg and Billy Williams were there, among other luminaries. A C-130 Hercules triumphantly flew over the stadium at the climax of the National Anthem, while a huge American flag rippled over the outfield grass, held by hundreds of hands. It was magnificent. It was almost enough to make me forget the crammed corridors and too-long lines that are a hallmark of the Wrigley experience. Every day should be Opening Day, a curated celebration of all that is good in life. Opening Day, however, cannot cancel out the rest of life. The world goes on. I was glad to be watching the Cubs win, because otherwise I might have been focused on the tariff-induced tumble that was creating so much loss in my retirement account. And while the markets were in free fall, other losses continued, too. Baseball does not mean the cessation of war, or the delay of diagnoses, or the end of oppression. 40,000 of us were having a grand old time, peanuts and Cracker Jack in hand, while billions of people suffered through another day of woe. One wonders, should we have been celebrating at all?

2. This is the question of Judas and, apart from his shady motivations, it's a good one. Jesus and his disciples are enjoying life – life that has won a triumph over death. They are at the home of the no-longer-dead Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha. In a brief respite between Jesus' public ministry and his impending Passion, they take a break from all that ails the world. All three siblings are engaged in discipleship, Lazarus in the enjoyment of table fellowship, Martha in serving, and Mary in her act of anointing. There is, by the way, no chiding of Martha here. Her care for others is valuable and valued. But in the face of Mary's anointing of Jesus, Judas objects. How, he wonders, can such extravagance be justified? The perfume, worth nearly a year's worth of labor, could have been sold, the proceeds given to the poor. One wonders how Mary even got her hands on such a treasure, not only expensive but coming all the way from India. Never mind his motives; does Judas have a point?
3. To be sure, we cannot, in the face of the suffering endured by our neighbors, near and far, be either the jackals or the ostriches invoked in our reading today from Isaiah. We cannot, must not, be the jackals, those animals which are not merely predators but opportunists. Jackals feast upon the suffering of others. Neither can we be ostriches, seemingly burying our heads in the sand, oblivious to the needs of others while we put away another overpriced hot dog and wash it down with a souvenir soda. Called into the life of discipleship, we cannot continue to be jackals or ostriches. So again, does Judas have a point?
4. In short? No. No, Judas does not have a point. First, as his own discipleship goes off the rails, he is completely missing the point of the moment. Jesus, six days before the Passover, is preparing himself, and being prepared, for his own Passover. He will enter into the depths of death so that we may live. In this moment, upon which hinges the life and future of all creation, nothing could be more appropriate than Mary's full focus on Jesus. And Jesus is quick

- to defend her, shutting down Judas. Jesus will not let the women in his life be silenced or shamed. Mary knows that Jesus' death is coming, and nothing short of an extravagant offering that fills every nook and cranny, that colors the whole scene, is worthy of the moment.
5. Yes, we will have the poor with us always. But this does not mean, as some would suggest, that we should do nothing for the poor in their plight. Jesus is not saying, "There will always be poverty and there's nothing you can do about it." No. Rather, Jesus is saying that we will never run out of opportunities to serve and care and love. Even more, Jesus is proclaiming that it is through the abundant gift of his death and resurrection – not in spite of it – that we are called to care for others. Mary's gift of nard is pure, not watered down. So, too, is the gift of Jesus that Mary's offering anticipated. God does not hold back anything but gives us everything in Christ. We gather now, again and again, at his fulsome feast. Our response to God's abundance is not to limit our celebration but to extend it, setting more seats at the ever-growing table at which Jesus is both host and meal. Like a parent welcoming home a prodigal child, we respond not with a meager meal but with effusive extravagance. We don't stop celebrating. We start inviting others.
 6. Last night, Erika and I gathered with other members of Grace for a watch party in support of the Harmony Community Cares benefit gala. In the comfort of a warm, wonderful home, we ate well and enjoyed fellowship with others.. But by God's call, we did so such that our hearts were opened to those who are hungry, for food and for justice. By the time we went home as victorious raffle winners, the gala had raised over \$180,000, money that will make a difference. We didn't end poverty. It will be with us until Jesus comes back. But we were reminded that our family is not only those who are related to us, that our homes are without walls, that our tables always have room for more. As we prepare to enter Holy Week, may we remember that the fragrant offering of Jesus pushes out the stench of death itself, and that in his

life we live now for others. There will always be those who are poor, oppressed, suffering. They, like us, are the ones for whom Christ died. In Christ, they are the ones for whom we live, in anticipation of God's unending celebration. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.