KGL+
Sermon
Trinity Church Boston
Year C, Lent 5
April 6, 2025

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together always be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

December 16, 1868.—I am in the most painful state of anxiety as to my poor kind friend, Charles.... Since the 30th of November I have had no letter from the dear invalid, who then said his last farewell to me. How long these two weeks have seemed to me—and how keenly I have realized that strong craving which many feel for the last words, the last looks, of those they love! Such words and looks are a kind of testament. They have a solemn and sacred character which is not merely an effect of our imagination… Oh, do not let us wait to be just or pitiful or demonstrative toward those we love until they or we are struck down by illness or threatened with death! Life is short and we have never too much time for gladdening the hearts of those who are traveling the dark journey with us. Oh, be swift to love, make haste to be kind![1]

Henri Frederic Amiel wrote those lines in his *Journal Intimes*, published after his death in 1881 in Geneva. The child of French Huguenot parents, emigrants to Switzerland, Amiel lost both his father and mother in the same year when he was 12 years old. The government which had originally welcomed emigrants at the time fell as well that year in a violent uprising. He attended prestigious schools in Geneva, and as several biographers note, while he did well academically, there were few awards marking him as someone particularly exceptional.

Amiel would go on to be appointed professor at the Geneva Academy, and then to professor of moral philosophy, a considerable position. However, the appointments came by way of the newly minted government, which often had stood in contrast with the principles of his own family and friends—his receiving the longed-for positions came at the cost of friendship and collegiality, and to no small extent, his own shame.

Amiel's writings would receive a generally mediocre reception in the mid-19th century academic world of Europe. Most would become footnotes. Amiel was not unaware of this during his life. In fact, he was too aware of it, and the disappointments and theological questioning this led to would lead to the writing he is, in fact, best known for—his personal journal. And in this journal, on December 16, 1868, we find this phrase: "Life is short… so be swift to love and make haste to be kind"; a phrase and blessing which far outlived his academic career and contributions to philosophy and poetry, simply because of its stunning truth.[2]

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[1] Taken from the December 18, 1868 entry found online here: https://www.gutenberg.org/files/8545/8545-h/8545-h.htm (These are the excerpts published from Amiel's *Journal Intimes*—it's a great read and he has some beautiful frameworks for someone focused on German Philosophy coupled with Romanticism!).
[2] There are not a lot of sources on Henri Frederic Amiel, mostly because his work wasn't heralded (then, or now). One of the more concise biographies with an eye to his philosophical background, can be found here: https://www.amiel.org/

There is death on every side of today's scripture in the Gospel of John. Previous to this passage, is the illness, death and raising of Lazarus; the Pharisees, under Caiaphas, are concerned for the safety of the Jews under the Roman occupation, and plot to center Rome's inevitable vengeance on Jesus[3]; we have the once-dead-and-buried Lazarus currently sitting at the table with Jesus at this dinner reminding everyone of both death and life[4]; and, following this morning's gospel, the authorities would decide to kill Lazarus as well, as his life offered evidence of Jesus' politically destabilizing ministry.[5] Immediately following *that* decision, we enter into Jerusalem with Jesus, palms strewn on the ground as welcome.[6] And we know where the story goes from there.

In the preceding chapter, John 11, nearly the entire focus is on the death of Lazarus. Mary and Martha, Lazarus' sisters, have a reprised role after their tiff over whether to serve or sit at Jesus' feet, and both now say out loud to Jesus, at different times, what has been pressing most on their hearts: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died," they each say.[7]

In the wake of the death of her brother, Mary knows what grief is; what loss is. Mary not only sat by her brother as he died, and as her hope in some miracle painfully waned while Jesus was still away, and she and her sister wrapped him in the burial shroud, and placed his lifeless body in the tomb.

No matter how pious she might have appeared while sitting at the feet of Jesus, Mary is not a romantic. She has smelled the smell of death. She has wept enough that when she suddenly leaves the house to meet Jesus on the road, the people mourning with her don't assume that she is hopeful about his approaching presence, but concerned that she is going back to the tomb to grieve there.[8]

Mary is under no Pollyanna-ish impression that Jesus will be fine after his very public raising of Lazarus, who, by the way, will never have a word to say again, in scripture. Mary *knows*. She knows what she would have done differently before her brother died. She has heard Jesus teach again and again about his forthcoming death (as the disciples did as well), and Mary is realistic about what is to come. And yet in the midst of her conviction that death is inevitable for her friend and teacher, she doesn't sit in denial, disbelieving that the worst can actually happen—it has; or refute what Jesus foretells of his fate to his disciples—which his disciples do doesn't offer to hide him, keeping him from harm in a locked upstairs room.

Mary doesn't do any of those things. Instead, Mary shows her friend how much she loves him.

She pours out what can only be acknowledged as an extraordinary extravagance of scented oil upon Jesus in that moment, wiping his feet—not washing them as Jesus will do for others,

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[3] John 11:45-53

[4] John 12:2

[5] Cf John 12:9-11

[6] John 12:12ff

[7] John 11: 21 (Martha, on the road) and John 11:32 (Mary when Jesus enters the house)

[8] John 11:31-32

interestingly enough, the verbs in Greek are different here[9]-- but wiping the excess oil with her hair. And we are told, the fragrance filled the room.

The contrast between that dinner and the outside plans for halting Jesus' ministry by the authorities looming large could not be more different in scope.

The strategic calculations of an empire rely on twinning scarcity and satiation to solidify their power—creating stakes where the less there is of something, the more valuable it appears to be; and, choosing to expend the very minimum needed to achieve cooperation, or status, or success—after all, one doesn't want to spend more on consolidating power over expendable people than one needs to. In reinforcing a competitive scheme of favoritism or punishment, the ones who are most at risk are trapped in a mutually devouring system—forced to imagine that striving for the smallest of privileges is something more than a paralyzing zero-sum game foisted upon them.

Hemmed in by fear and threat from their Roman occupiers, the Pharasaic leaders are forced to do their calculations as well. Caiaphas does the math for them: in order for their sanctuary to be let alone, and their people to hopefully remain unmolested by Roman officials, he points out, it is better for one man to be blamed and killed than an entire nation.[10] I won't contest the strategy of an occupied state two thousand years ago: however, the threat Jesus posed was that of possible life outside of the fear of empire—extolling a God who categorically refused to make the choice between one man and the whole people, claiming it as a false dichotomy.

Mary's gesture is too intimate, it's too over the top, it's too wasteful and extravagant, and, honestly, it's a bit cringy even for the non-Puritanical among us. She takes oil, costing a year's salary—of her own means and money (Judas is, in addition to being rather conniving and weak in the Gospel of John, also a total mansplainer, clearly insinuating to Mary how best to spend her own money)—and pours it, not on the head of Jesus in this version of the story, but on his feet.

And instead of being embarrassing, it is received by Jesus with gratitude, grace and most of all, love.

Mary knows all too well that life is short. And unpredictable. And wrenching. She has lived it and she has buried it. And she knows that a different response must be offered in the face of this transient life—and she pours it over her friend, because there is no way that she doesn't know that he, too, will soon be dead. And life is too short.

The proclamation of extravagant, abundant, mind-boggling love in the face of the endless calculations towards oppression is what today's Gospel is about. Henri Frederic Amiel had his own share of heartache and disappointment in life, and not least in the impending death of his friend. His next journal entry would tell of Charles' death in a single simple sentence. And still, in face of that ominous reminder—'life is short'—he chooses to love.

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[9] ἤλειψεν = annointed and ἐξέμαξεν = wiped in John 12; in John 13:5ff (our Maundy Thursday scriptures), the verbs used for the washing of feet is βάλλει = pouring and νίπτειν = to wash. While the English translation and imagery are very similar, the intentions appear to be different.

[10] "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. **48** If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation."

Surrounded by the clamor to offer, and expect, the bare minimum, we inadvertently tap into the temptation that the devil once offered Jesus—and us—on the precipice of us entering into the wilderness: to believe that power is the true currency of a merciful God. And if we remain paralyzed in that place, we might never consider the second part of Amiel's declaration: to be quick to love and make haste to be kind. His words, spoken into the intimacy of his own journal, never for anyone else, only originally for himself, profess a truth beyond anything he himself might have dared dreamed—that his fervent hope—complete with exclamation points in the original text— that love could overcome death was an incarnate possibility.

During these waning days of Lent, with only scattered palms ahead of us, we can deny the accusation of our insignificance: by pouring out our love. No matter how much the world tells us that we are wasting our energy and our resources and our God-given potential. But we pour it out, over each imperfect human. Towards our savior, Jesus. Abundantly offered to God not as a sacrifice, friends, but as revolutionary declaration.

Amen.