

Amen

Seventh in Lenten Series on the Lord's Prayer

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from the pulpit of
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John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ²There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" ⁶(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) ⁷Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." ⁹When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, ¹¹since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

Since we often have visitors for these special evening services, let me begin by saying that through the season of Lent we have been guided by the Lord's Prayer. Each Sunday morning we have looked at a phrase of the prayer to consider its depth of meaning. This past Palm Sunday we focused on the closing acclamation, *Thine is the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory forever*, lifting our praises like those expectant crowds who hailed King Jesus riding the donkey into Jerusalem. That was Sunday, and we who show up for worship tonight and tomorrow are paying attention to how those *Hosannas* turn into betrayal and the brutal cries of *Crucify him!* There is just one word left in the Lord's Prayer for us to ponder, and as I thought about it, I was moved to put the final *Amen* here. Because on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday we remember the culmination of Jesus life and his sacrificial love for us.

Amen brings us to the end of the Lord's Prayer with a resounding affirmation. The word functions as an exclamation point! The English is a direct carry over from the Greek; the Greek a direct carry over from the Hebrew. Its primary meaning is *truly*. So be it! May it be so! When we end the prayer with *Amen*, the congregation signals our assent to every word of the prayer, saying this is true.¹ Truth has come close to us in person, embodied in Jesus of Nazareth, who teaches us about the God to whom we belong, the God who provides us our essential needs. To pray this prayer commits us to move into the world as disciples – feeding, forgiving, resisting and empowering as citizens of God's Kingdom. In the little word, *Amen*, lies remarkable profundity: our acclamation of yes to God is elicited by God's prior affirmation of yes to us.

The gospel writer, John, draws one of the most beautiful pictures of the Amen of Jesus' life. John always wants us to know not only what is happening in a particular scene, but also what it means. Twice in these eight verses, there are two little comments – that have nothing to do with the action – but are little asides the gospel writer inserts into the story. When he describes Judas Iscariot as *one of Jesus' disciples*, John notes - as if in a whisper: (the one who was about to betray him). When Judas criticizes Mary's anointing Jesus with costly perfume as a waste, John writes in parenthesis: (*Judas said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief.*) John narrates the action; but also underlines and emphasizes his theological point. The story unfolds, and then there is the parenthetical explanation of what is really going on. So here in Bethany just two miles from Jerusalem, and only days

¹ Clifton Black, *The Lord's Prayer* in *Interpretation* series, p. 242.

before Jesus is arrested, John is layering the narrative with deeper and deeper levels of meaning – in whispered expressions of profound understanding. As one commentator has put it: “John is convinced that ordinary events unfold around us, but that hidden among all the mundane props are signs of the eternal. For John, the wine is in the water, the light is in the darkness, the Word is in the flesh.”²

John tells us the story, and then makes sure that God’s deepest truth about it is revealed. Here we have an ordinary dinner in a home among friends. And yet, something absolutely extraordinary is being revealed. We have been in this room before. You remember. This is the home of Jesus’ dear friends, Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus. Making our way with Jesus to Jerusalem for the final stop, Bethany is the best place to stay – in a warm and welcoming home with friends, while the clatter of swords and rumors of arrest swirl around outside.

You remember the last time we had dinner here. Poor Martha, busying herself about the kitchen, making sure the food was good, that there was enough for everyone to eat. Martha – making an occasional sideways glance toward Mary who was just sitting there at Jesus’ feet hanging on to his every word while there was so much work to do. Exasperated Martha finally blurted out: “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?” Jesus kindly told her then, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. Leave Mary alone, for she has chosen to be with me.”

Tonight, we are back in this very same room. Martha is again serving the meal; Jesus again saying, “Leave Mary alone.” But the tension this time far exceeds the previous scene of sisters vying for Jesus’ attention. The drumbeat of a trial in Jerusalem hangs in the air like a gathering storm, for not far away is the sound of trees being hewn into beams, and the heat of iron ore being forged into nails. And the odd family dynamic is not about the sisters this time; it’s about their brother. Just days ago Lazarus was dead in the tomb, until Jesus came, and cried in grief, and then shouted to Lazarus to come back to life again. In John’s gospel, it was Jesus’ bringing Lazarus back to life that was the final straw in the minds of those plotting to arrest him. It was one thing to heal on the Sabbath, or to make a blind person see, or to eat with tax collectors and sinners, but they could not have a person raising people from the dead! That was blasphemy, a power reserved for God alone.

² Tom Long, “Gospel Sound Track,” *Christian Century*, 3/14/2001.

John is clear to point out that Lazarus is there -- Lazarus, who never says a word, even though he is the talk of the town. And so seated at this table, we have a dead man in Lazarus who is now alive, and a living man in Jesus - who may as well be dead. Mary, again at the feet of Jesus, seems to be the only one who understands this, for in those days the only feet that ever got anointed were the feet of the dead in preparation for burial. When Mary reaches for the pound of costly nard, worth a full year's wages, and lovingly pours it over Jesus' feet, filling the house with its fragrant perfume, here is God's *Amen*. Here is God's deepest truth about the humanity of Jesus.

In this gospel layered with meaning, Mary's anointing of Jesus is not a mere indulgence for a friend in trouble, but a costly act of proclaiming this man - Jesus – is the Son of God. When Jesus responds to Judas' rebuke of Mary saying, "Leave her alone; you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." He is not implying that nothing should be done for the poor. Jesus is simply quoting this commandment from Deuteronomy: always "open your hand to the poor, because there will never cease to be some in need." Jesus knows the fragrant smell of perfume that fills the house is the aroma of his holy death. A life laid down for those he loves is not an expense that can be allocated elsewhere.

Friends, the reason we have been invited to this dinner party at Bethany, is to prepare us for the death that is awaiting Jesus, *and* for the hint of resurrection we can already see in Lazarus. John whispers between the plot lines, revealing the deep truth of the story because he wants us to see what it reveals about Jesus is also about us. From his death will come our life. Our lives too, in other words, have these parenthetical explanations of God's purposes. There is the narrative of our lives that is readily apparent in who we relate to and how we spend our days. And then, between the lines of our lives, there is a plot line of meaning, one that whispers about how the God of Life is everywhere in it.

I am so grateful that we have this beautiful memory of Jesus in a home, among a family he loved, at table with his closest friends. Because when we come to this Communion table, the *Amen* of his life becomes for us the truth of our lives. His broken body makes us whole. His blood poured out fills us to overflowing. Truly. May it be so! Amen and Amen.