

Text: John 12: 1-11  
Title: Dancing on the Devil's Dancefloor  
Date: 04.03.22  
Roger Allen Nelson

Detroit: An American Autopsy opens with these lines and this image:

*I took a deep breath through my cigarette. I didn't want to use my nose. It was late January, the air scorching cold. The snow was falling sideways as it usually did in Detroit this time of the year. The dead man was encased in at least four feet of ice at the bottom of a defunct elevator shaft in an abandoned building. But still, there was no telling what the stink might be like.*

From there the author goes on for 300 pages to describe the desolation and deterioration of Detroit. The image of a man found frozen to death in an abandoned building becomes a metaphor for the faceless-nameless poor who are left behind in a burned-out-American-city.

It's a haunting image, but it could be lifted any-day from any-paper anywhere in world. We get the grisly details of death every day. From bodies lying in the streets of Ukraine, to another shooting in Chicago, to the war in Yemen or the mass graves of a Rohingya genocide. We get the images every day, but we rarely get the smell.

The Bible, however, is full of stories of life and death that give sensory details. Scripture includes, in a variety of places, references to what things smell like: food, perfume, smoke, and death.

For example, just before our text this morning Jesus shows up late to heal Lazarus and after a good cry with the family he goes to the tomb. Finding a stone over the opening Jesus asks that it be rolled away. Martha protests, "He's been dead for four days there's no telling what the stink will be like."

But then Jesus yells for Lazarus to come out, and through tears of grief and confusion, Martha sees Lazarus stumble out of the grave still wrapped in the linens of the dead. She can't believe her eyes, but there was no fooling her nose. He was dead and now he was alive....

Hallelujah!  
Get your finest suit!  
Put on your best dress!  
We're gonna have a resurrection dinner party!

And that's where our text picks up this morning.  
Allow me a little space for imagination.

Martha, an exceptional cook, was busy in the kitchen. There was little in this world that made her happier than family and friend gathered around the table for a good meal. This was the best way she knew to say thank-you.

Lazarus, still shaking off death's cobwebs, couldn't eat fast enough. Who knows how long you get after you've been dead once. With this second go-round, the bread and wine never tasted better.

Jesus was the honored guest. These were some of his best friends, but the truth is, they really didn't know what to make of him. He was a friend, but he was also teacher, miracle worker, maybe Messiah, and now he raised the dead!?

Around the table they told stories, gave toasts, savored each dish, and once in while they couldn't help but look at Lazarus and laugh in delightful disbelief. It was like Jesus said in that story about the prodigal son:

*Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again.  
He was lost and is found.*

So, they celebrated and enjoyed each moment.

And yet there was no mistaking, even with a used-to-be-dead-guy at the table, they were hemmed in and anxious. The rumor was that in the murky-waters of church and state, the Pharisees, chief priests, and Roman guard were plotting to take Jesus and Lazarus. Death lurked in the shadows. There was an uneasy undercurrent.

Then Mary cracked open an expensive bottle of oil and poured it over the dry-calloused feet of Jesus. It was the best way that she knew to say thank you....

Let expense be damned.

Let danger be damned.

Let death be damned.

She loosened her hair – good Jewish women never let their hair down – and she began to wipe the oil over his feet with her tousled black mane. Before she could stop them, tears were mixing with the oil, and the room was full of the fragrance of nard and food and feet and death. And, Mary didn't know if she was crying for joy or fear.

Spiky-haired-bespectacled-Canadian-singer-song-writer Bruce Cockburn wrote a song in the mid-1980s entitled "Lovers in a Dangerous Time." I've long wondered if he had this scene in mind. Listen to these lines...

*These fragile bodies of touch and taste  
This vibrant skin – this hair like lace  
Spirits open to the thrust of grace  
Never a breath you can afford to waste  
When you're lovers in a dangerous time*

*When you're lovers in a dangerous time  
Sometimes you're made to feel as if your love's a crime –  
But nothing worth having comes without some kind of fight –  
Got to kick at the darkness 'til it bleeds daylight  
When you're lovers in a dangerous time*

The story of a woman anointing Jesus with oil and/or tears is in every gospel. Depending on which gospel, it happens at different times, different places, and in different ways.

For example, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is having dinner with the Pharisees when a woman wipes his feet with her tears and pours out perfume. In Mark the woman pours it on his head – probably an allusion to Jesus being anointed as Messiah. And here in John, Mary pours the oil on his feet like one preparing a body for burial. And when Judas objects Jesus explicitly says that this was meant for his burial.

What's easily lost (in all of that) is the tender-human-moment of love in a dangerous time. For, in gratitude for a life after death, or in fear of a coming conflict with the state, Jesus and Mary let the extravagance of expensive perfume overwhelm the stench of death. Rather than run or hide, wilt, rebel, or turn away they look death in the face and Mary says thank you. The best way that she knew how. An act of love in a dangerous time.

Dear friends, in the face of death, or cancer, or heart disease, or mired in cultural wars, or knowing the horrors of real war, or simply when your spirit is beatdown, weary, dead....

In the face of any of that, or all of that, the gospel doesn't gloss over death or danger, nor does it offer some special protection or a secret way out.

Rather, the gospels proclaim a God who enters into death, who knows grief and betrayal, who suffers the torture of the state and the terror of the mob. The mystery of the gospel is that God doesn't side step death, or sublimate death, but God goes through death, knows the cold of death, tastes the bile of death, smells the stink of death, and rises up in resurrection.

Dear friends, this story may be part of demonstrating that Jesus is divine – with power over death, but it also acknowledges or accepts death. And maybe there is some manner of Lenten “first fruit” here....

The season of Lent offers us a clear-eyed, full-hearted recognition of death. We don't gloss it over or deny its inevitability, but we offer a community in which to live and die with dignity and hope. And we don't face death with despair, or some cheap way of playing pretend, but we face death in the grip of God's hand, our faith in resurrection. And, in that we live and die differently – we even smell different.

Paul puts it this way to the church in Corinth:

*Thanks be to God, who... uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ....*

Richard Lischer writes about a woman battling cancer. She had completed two full courses of chemotherapy while finishing her doctoral dissertation. To celebrate she and her husband rented a VFW hall, hired a band, and threw a big party. Lischer writes this:

*Then, two days before graduation her doctor confirmed that the cancer was back. Experimental treatments would begin the day after graduation. My guess was they would limp through the ceremony and cancel the party.*

*But, she had the party. And I tell you that I have never heard the gospel of God's "yes" preached more powerfully than I saw it danced on the floor of the VFW. An outsider would have only seen arthritic gyrations... but this was a woman of faith and she danced her "yes" in the grip of the "no." And that is the way we do it. The best celebrating is done in the face of the enemy; the best dancing is done on the devil's dance floor.*

So, without being trite or flippant.

Get out your best dress!

Put on your finest suit!

Dust off your dancing shoes!

We're gonna have a resurrection dinner party!

Break open a bottle of perfume,

pour out the best wine,

slice the finest bread,

and dance on the devil's dance floor.

You might even want to join in the conga-line.

Dear friends, you're not alone.

God is present.

Don't be afraid.

Love, even in this dangerous time.

Our hope is in resurrection.

You can almost smell it.

Amen.