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Here we are just a week before Palm Sunday. Each year, these six weeks of Lent seem to pass so quickly. As we near the end of this season, we are also nearing the end of Jesus' story. Or we might say the end, which is also a beginning, as death will be transformed into resurrection on Easter Sunday. But we aren't there yet. We have a ways to travel before Easter. In the next two weeks, in our Palm Sunday and Holy Week liturgies, we'll walk through those last days of the life of Jesus.

Today, we enter into that walk at the home of the siblings: Lazarus, Mary, and Martha in the town of Bethany which is just outside of Jerusalem. The scriptures don't tell us a lot about this family, but it seems that they were close and beloved friends of Jesus, though not in the inner circle of the disciples who traveled with him regularly.

Today we meet them as they are giving a dinner for Jesus... and at least some portion of his disciples that included Judas. They are sitting at the table as Martha serves them. But if we go back a chapter in John's Gospel, we will find a story that needs telling before we can fully understand what's going with these people gathered around this table.

That story, found in the eleventh chapter of John, began with Jesus receiving a note from Martha and Mary. A note telling him that their brother, Lazarus, was near death and that Jesus should come immediately to save him. This note grieved Jesus because as John's Gospel tells us, Jesus loved Mary and Martha and Lazarus. But Jesus didn't come immediately. In fact, he waited a couple of days before making the journey to Bethany. When he finally arrived, Martha, and then Mary met him on the road to tell him that he was too late. That Lazarus was dead. And upon hearing the news, Jesus wept.

But then Jesus went to the tomb where Lazarus had been placed four days ago. The local Judeans who had gathered at the house of Mary and Martha to console them, followed them to the tomb where they rolled away the stone at the request of Jesus. Already there was a stench from the body in the tomb. But Jesus cried with a loud voice for Lazarus to come out.

And to the shock of all those who witnessed this miracle, "The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. And Jesus said [to those gathered], 'Unbind him, and let him go.'"

Lazarus was dead. And now he is alive. And just a few days later we find him gathered with his sisters, with Jesus, and with some of the disciples at this meal that is the center of our Gospel story this morning. We would imagine this to be a joyous event. Lazarus has been restored to them. They must be overjoyed. But there must have also been a shadow over the gathering. The Temple authorities in Rome had been keeping a close eye on Jesus and the followers he was attracting, and it seems as if the raising of Lazarus was the last straw. Because this miracle attracted so much attention in the region that it made his movement a threat to stability and therefore to the status of those with power in Jerusalem. Jesus was threatening their privilege with the Romans. Even the crowds were now being asked to turn Jesus in. The authorities were promising money to those who would betray Jesus. And the life of Lazarus was

being threatened, as well, because the very fact that he was alive attracted people to Jesus' movement.

So there must have been fear, and perhaps even some suspicion of internal threats, hanging over this dinner in Bethany.

But despite the fear in the room, what the actions of Mary tell us...her kneeling at the feet of Jesus to anoint his feet with the wildly expensive and wonderful smelling oil...is that more than fear, there is love in the room. And because of that love, there is heartache at what is surely coming for Jesus. In this story, John gives us a peek into the very human side of Jesus. He is at the table with people he loves and who love him...even the presence of Judas, Jesus' betrayer, does not change that fact. I suspect that Judas was motivated by jealousy and a desire for money, neither of which means he didn't love Jesus, even as he planned to betray him.

Those gathered at this table with Jesus reveal his full humanity. On display here are the real, complicated relationships of human beings. I think it's important for us to see that...for us to feel that...as we prepare for Palm Sunday and Holy Week. It was a fully human Jesus that walked that difficult road. He had friends and family who loved him dearly. At this moment in his story, we are far from the joy of Easter.

Because those feet that Mary has anointed, they will take Jesus right into the lion's den, so to speak. The next day, after this dinner, he will make his way into Jerusalem to face the charges against him. And in a week's time, he will hang on a cross.

But on this night...Mary kneels at his feet and pours out the oil over them, the expensive nard that would have filled the room with its scent. Judas called her action a waste. Surely the oil would have been more useful if it had been sold and the money given to the poor?

Jesus' response to Judas, when he says, "Leave her alone, you will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me" is not a callous disregard for the needs of the poor. In fact, he is quoting Deuteronomy, which those gathered would have known well. It is the beginning of a commandment to open our hands to the poor and needy among us. That work would always be important.

But in this moment, the oil is an extravagance that is justified, not wasted. Just as the precious oil is poured out, the precious life of Jesus is about to be poured out. A life lived listening to the call of the Father to heal and feed, challenge the rules about who is a sinner, preach about the extravagant love of God for all, even raise a man from the dead. That life, Jesus' life, will be poured out, but surely it was not wasted.

Mary honored Jesus with the anointing. She honored the life of obedience and love he had lived thus far, and she honored the journey to the cross which he was about to embark upon. It was not a wasteful extravagance. Just like the life of Jesus was not a wasteful extravagance. So how will we honor Jesus as Mary did? Perhaps one way, would be, to invite that life that was poured out, to live on in us. May it be so. Amen.