

Something Is Missing
John 12:1-8
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When I was a younger man, with a little cash in my pocket and some eardrums to spare, I bought a pretty high-powered stereo system for my 1981 Subaru DL hatchback. If you remember those cars, you will remember how small they were, and it didn't take much wattage at all to make any music sound pretty good in there. But that wasn't enough for me. No, I needed a 40 watt Blaupunkt amplifier with matching equalizer, two honking big woofers in the back, and two tweeters in the doors, so I could crank it up loud enough to feel the beat of the bass in my chest, and, if the circumstances were just right, to make a little blood come oozing out of my ears. Well, maybe that is exaggerating just a little, but it was a system that could have easily damaged my ears for life, but that didn't matter at all. What mattered was the music. Now it's true that a 40-watt amplifier really brings out the best in a recording. I mean you can hear stuff in the background that makes a good song great, and even a bad song sound almost good, yes, it really brings out the best in the music, but I can't say it really brought out the best in me. I was either showing it off, listening to it while riding around burning up more than my fair share of fossil fuels, or endlessly searching for new cassettes I could play in it. Yes, it was *that* long ago, the era of cassette tapes, when I was young and irresponsible, relatively speaking, at least. It was not a time I devoted much

attention to God. And I wouldn't have known if God was paying any attention to me. I had my music turned up so loud, the divine voice didn't stand a chance. Sometimes you have to turn off the music to hear yourself think, or to hear God speaking.

I suppose I've gone from one extreme to the other. In our home these days, and in the car, there is a lot less music playing, and a lot less volume when there is. But I certainly don't feel the poorer for it, and my ears have held up very well, thank you, at least when Flora's not speaking to me. The truth is I have survived perfectly well, and even thrived, without maintaining an endless, high volume soundtrack in my ears. Perhaps I have missed out on some real soul-stirring music in the last few decades, but I think it was worth the trade-off. The only real music worth listening to, good old-fashioned Rock and Roll, is dead anyway, right? I mean, what are the odds of a Blue Oyster Cult reunion? Am I dating myself?

Don't get me wrong, however. The music I do listen to adds a lot to my life. It brings peace, and joy, and inspiration. I've shared some of my favorites in various settings at ECF. The participants on last year's Men's Retreat heard all they could handle of Johnny Cash. And the year before, they were introduced to the work of Arvo Pärt, the brilliant Estonian Orthodox composer, and David M. Bailey, the Presbyterian folk singer. Yes, music does still mean a lot to me, not only recorded music, but maybe even more importantly church music, the music we sing and play each week, the music I remember from my childhood in the

church's children's choir and bell choir, the hymns and songs and spiritual songs. More than rock and roll, this is the soundtrack of my life that really matters. And so, perhaps like me, you are a little uncomfortable in tonight's service, in which we have no music, save one a cappella song. And that's a good thing, because it might just give you some insight about our Gospel reading tonight that you might have missed otherwise.

So. Imagine your life without any music at all, not just missing from church, but missing from life. Not that you are deaf. There is sound. There is just no music. It is a pretty barren, hardly celebratory life. Dancing would be difficult, though not impossible. Birthday parties would look (and sound) a lot different. How you experience movies and television shows would be dramatically altered. You would have to find a different frame of reference for the highs and lows of your life. In short, your life without music would be almost completely different than it is today, and likely the poorer for it. Maybe we'd find a way to adapt, to celebrate in new ways, to communicate what music communicates through different media. Or maybe we'd just be a sullen, drab, dreary, workaholic people, grinding it out, day by day. You could say the same about food without flavor, or landscapes without color (with all due respect to the great Ansel Adams), or stories without happy endings. There would be something missing from our lives, something if not absolutely essential, then at least something we wouldn't want to live without, if there were any way around it.

And this is why Mary poured a years' worth of wages on Jesus' feet. This is what Mary recognized in Jesus, that although she might be alive, without him there was no life worth living. She knew it first hand, and so did her whole family. It wasn't only that Lazarus had been raised from the dead. It was that he had been raised to new life. In this bold thing Mary has done, we see that she has recognized that Jesus is who he says he is. Back when he raised Lazarus from the dead, he told her sister Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die," and asked her, "Do you believe this?" And Martha says yes, even though when it came time for Jesus to try to raise her brother, she hedged her bets when she reminded Jesus that Lazarus has been dead for four days and that the stench of the tomb would be overwhelming. So much for Martha.

But in tonight's story, Mary gets it; Mary says with her action, "Yes, I believe." As a result of her belief, she does several amazing things which show that she does get it. The power of the witness of Mary's discipleship in this story is that she knows how to respond to Jesus without being told, unlike the disciples who will need to be told in upcoming chapters of John to "love one another." She fulfills Jesus' commandment to love by washing his feet with perfume before he teaches it to the disciples by washing theirs with water; she embraces Jesus' departure at his "hour" when she anoints his body in preparation for burial while he is yet alive before he has taught his followers about the true meaning of his

departure. She gives boldly of herself in love to Jesus at this hour, just as Jesus will give boldly of himself in love at his hour. In those upcoming chapters in John we call Jesus' farewell discourse, he will make explicit what this story shows: discipleship is defined by acts of love and one's response to Jesus. Let it not be overlooked that the Fourth Evangelist names a woman as the first to embody the love that is commanded of all disciples. Ladies, give yourselves a hand.

What Mary did when she anointed Jesus' feet with an extravagant and abundant amount of perfume was recognize that though we spend most of our lives searching for intimacy with God, we rarely experience it as we might wish, and we even more rarely celebrate it as we should. Was she grateful that Jesus had brought her brother back from the dead? Sure. But was she more grateful that Jesus brought with him abundant and eternal life for all and that he had shared it with her? No doubt. I'm reminded of those great Mastercard commercials, you know the kind, like with the father and son who go to the baseball park, and the program costs so many dollars, and the hotdogs cost so many dollars but that there are things money can't buy? And in our gospel story tonight, it might go something like this: One roast mutton dinner with friends: 18 shekels. One pound of nard for anointing the feet of the Messiah: Three thousand denarii. One traitorous friend: 30 pieces of silver. Celebrating that God is in your midst? Priceless. You see, Mary knew what my Grandma Lystad knew after her second husband died, when she said to Flora and me: "Use all your nice stuff, the china, the linens, the things you have set aside

for special occasions, use them all the time, because life is short and the time for celebrating may be gone before you know it.”

I read this week a story that seems apropos. It was about an older man in his late eighties, a conservative warrior for as long as anyone could remember. His favorite grandson, whom he had not seen for long time, was getting married in Massachusetts about six hours away. It would be a small, but unconventional, family affair. Because he had been so ardently set on propriety and tradition, the family decided not to say anything, and so he was not invited, but somehow, as grandparents usually do, he found out. And yes, you guessed it; it was in Massachusetts, and his grandson was marrying another man, although that’s not really the point of the story.

On the day of the wedding, who showed up, but grandpa. Following the service, with more than a little nervousness around the family circle, he walked to the head of the greeting line and with the gracefulness of a ballroom dancer he embraced groom and groom with tears flowing down their faces. At the reception, with a glass or two of wine under his belt, the groom’s father asked the grandfather about his attendance while stammering an apology for not inviting him to the grandson’s wedding. In response, his father replied, “My son, as the years go by, you begin to learn that life tends to take all the sweet and leave the crap behind. Then one day, if you have any smarts at all, you begin to realize that in fact maybe it’s you who have quit tasting the sweetness of living. When you are dead, eternity

is a long time. So it's important to taste the joy of the moments God gives whenever you have the chance, and in the end the only important thing to remember is to love.”

The role of Lent, I think, is to help us get those “smarts” that help us realize what is really important, that in our mini-deprivation, we focus on the right things, get some perspective, get some gratitude. I, for one, have been struggling more than most years in my Lenten fast. I think I have actually gained a few pounds because since I am not drinking any type of beverages but water, my taste buds keep looking for a replacement. And so I have been eating a lot more, trying to satisfy my body that knows something is missing from its routine. If I put that in spiritual terms, I realize that if I go without Christ for too long, if I keep some other soundtrack permanently blaring in my ears, if I leave the good china under wraps until it's too late, if I let my prejudices overwhelm my relationships, I'll turn to satisfy in unhealthy ways what my soul knows is missing. Life is too short to go without coffee and tea and juice and milk, and yes, even beer and wine. Those are good things with which God has blessed us. But for a little while, that I might renew my gratitude to God for these blessings, and for Jesus Christ who makes all of my life so much richer, I can gladly go without. In what remains of this year's Lent, may we each recognize through the fasting of our minds or bodies what each of our spirits need, and celebrate in the extravagant way Mary has shown us.

Amen.