

“Full to the Brim: Brazen Acts of Beauty”
John 12:1-8

I recently learned about an art project for the Bible. This was started by two artists who were new to the faith and wanted to connect to something deeper for people. According to an article posted on Faith and Leadership, “When Brian Chung converted to Christianity, he was excited to read the Bible. But the book he picked up was dark -- black and purple. The paper was thin and the text tiny. ‘For someone that didn’t grow up Christian, it was unlike any other book experience I’d had,’ he said. ‘For someone that had studied design in college, I thought to myself, ‘How could this be done differently?’” Out of that experience came the Alabaster Bible art project:
<https://youtu.be/Mw8hFFyWK8Q>.

Beauty is such an important part of our story of faith. We rarely think of beauty when it comes to faith, but God is the ultimate creator of beauty. When we look at the beauty of creation, it tells us how much God loves to create beauty and when we create or behold beauty, we are participating in God’s very essence and life in and around us. Beauty helps us to fill our souls when they feel empty. This is what Mary did for Jesus when he was facing a lot of upheaval after he raised their brother Lazarus from the dead. He was close to the end as the religious leaders were so upset with him. After the raising of Lazarus, they were terrified about the mob that would follow him and would try to take over. The threat of revolution seemed so high and they had to do something to stop it. Jesus needed a break from all the confrontations and the high emotions of his imminent entry into Jerusalem. He went to the house of his friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus for a time of rest.

Mary knew that Jesus needed encouragement and support and so she offered him an act of beauty, love, and deep care. Let’s listen to John 12:1-8.

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ² There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³ Mary 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. ⁴ But 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.) ⁷ Jesus said, ‘Leave her alone. She bought it[□] so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸ You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.’

Mary was so effusive in her acts of love and devotion to Jesus. She anointed his feet. She used a whole pound of a very expensive perfume of pure nard. The ointment came

from Northern India and was made of pure nard. The worth of the ointment was about a year's wages. Nard came from a plant that grows in the Himalayas and was used as ointment or perfume, mostly for burial. The cost of the ointment was worth about 300 denarii, about \$54,509 in U.S. dollars. So you can understand why this seemed like an over the top act of devotion. Why the whole pound? It seemed wasteful and outrageous. Not only that, Mary also used her hair to wipe Jesus' feet in a public kind of setting. Judas who was about to betray Jesus saw what Mary did as a waste of resources. He wondered why the money was not used to help the poor instead. The Gospel writer tells of the true motivations of Judas though. He looked at the money that he could have stolen as he was the treasurer for Jesus. He could have at least skimmed \$10,000 for himself. What Judas failed to see was that Jesus needed this act of courageous and generous love to face the powers of the world that were seeking to destroy him.

Mary's actions of brazen beauty and love were the backbone of love which Jesus needed. They helped him withstand the storm of hate he was facing. With that much nard used on his feet, I can't help but wonder if the smell lingered with Jesus to carry him through his arrest and crucifixion only a few days later. As he was sweating through the pain of the crucifixion, did the smell of nard stay with Jesus as a faithful reminder of love? We know that the sense of smell is one of the most powerful emotional senses for human beings. It connects us back in an instance to memories and experiences. That is why in many religious traditions, people use incense to help people worship and pray.

Brazen acts of beauty carry us through so many challenges in life from flowers at a funeral to beautiful cards during a hardship. Beauty in nature often pulls us out of our ruts and pain to become engulfed by something larger than life itself. In his book, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace*, John O'Donohue notes that "humans yearn for beauty and seek it everywhere. But sadly, there is a surfeit of ugliness, coarseness, and tawdriness in the media, in architecture, and in our environment. In turning away from beauty, we turn away from all that is wholesome and true, and deliver ourselves into an exile where the vulgar and the artificial dull and deaden the human spirit. Also lamentable is our habit of mistaking glamour for beauty. Far too much emphasis is put upon good looks, image, and fashion. Far too little attention is given to the dignity, grandeur, and nobility of the human spirit."

The invitation of this story about Mary's act of brazen beauty is for us to look for or create beauty as a part of our faith to find courage to live by the values of love and to find hope even in the midst of deep pain.

An artist came to my mind this week in relation to beauty and the theme of being filled to the brim. His name is Makoto Fujimura. He is a renowned artist who serves as founder of the International Arts Movement. He combines his faith and his love for Japanese culture and art to present a message of deep hope through beauty. Makoto believes that beauty is essential to our total wellness, and to the development of our souls. He writes, "Do we need beauty in our lives? If we desire to be fully human, the answer is yes, absolutely. But . . . even this question is ultimately utilitarian, we must shift from asking, What do we need? to 'What do we long for?'" Makoto affirms that there is a hunger in our souls for beauty. He writes, "Art is not ultimately 'useful.' It serves no

practical function...this is why it is indispensable, especially in the modern age.” He knows that art helps us to move beyond our obsession with what is “useful”. “Beauty is a gift that we discover, receive, and steward. This is a claim that beauty is found both in nature and in culture. It is something that is given to us, and it is also something we human beings can add to—something we can cultivate. God asks us to continue as he began. We have the ability and responsibility to create more (gratuitous) beauty.” Here is a video clip about Makoto’s vision of how beauty can help us through the challenges and pain of life: <https://vimeo.com/241330572>.

Take a moment to reflect on what is connecting with your spirit about beauty. What is your soul longing for as you ponder this theme of being filled to the brim through brazen acts of beauty?

Let’s listen to a poem about some lessons from a winter rose.

Lessons from a Winter Rose
By Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

I am dumbfounded
by the sheer persistence
of a winter rose
that blooms
on the coldest of days—
when the rest of the world
has turned dim and gray,
when the rest of the world is sleeping.

The audacity
to stand so tall,
to decorate the world with color,
to be the only one
brave enough
to bloom.
I wonder what that’s like.

Maybe it’s similar
to pouring perfume
on the feet of Jesus—
shocking and beautiful
at the same time.

On winter morning walks
I pass a bed of roses.
I dare not pick one.
Instead I say thank you.

Thank you for the beauty.
Thank you for the reminder.
Thank you for the bloom.
And I walk home and pray—
God, if you can,
make me that brave.

Today, we will end with an invitation for you to come forward to receive an anointing on your wrist using nard oil to recall Mary's anointing of Jesus:

May God's beauty fill your soul to the brim! Amen.