“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul and with all thy mind. Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”

What is she doing with the nard oil? Doesn’t she know how expensive this is?

Today we hear of the extravagance of Mary of Bethany, and the fragrant nard oil she uses to anoint Jesus’ feet before his death.

This Mary – and there are several Mary(s) in the gospels – is the sister of Martha, who it seems is always in the kitchen. Mary and Martha are the sisters of Lazarus, who is raised from the dead.

This is one memorable family.

How Mary got the nard oil left is unexplained, but having it suggests this is a very wealthy family.

Nard, or spikenard as it is also known, is an herb that grows to be about 10 feet tall in northern India, in the deep woods at the foot of the Himalayas.

In the time of Jesus, rich yellow oil was painstakingly extracted from the spikenard plant and placed in alabaster boxes.

The alabaster boxes were then carefully transported by caravan through India and Persia and across the long treacherous desert of what is now Iraq and Jordan before reaching the markets of Jerusalem.

Spikenard oil has a sweet fragrance similar to sandalwood, and, in fact, spikenard is one of the ingredients in sandalwood incense.

Spikenard oil is said to cure migraines and bring calm to those who inhale its aroma. The oil of spikenard was much sought by kings and wealthy Romans throughout the ancient Mediterranean world.

The oil of spikenard is hugely expensive. As we just heard, it cost Mary 300 denari for one pound of nard oil – and a pound of this oil is a lot of oil. Let me translate that for you: it took a common laborer one day to earn one denari – so it cost nearly one year’s wages to purchase that pound of nard oil.

In our day, spikenard oil is still costly – a pound now runs about $480. There are many places on this globe today where that would be one year’s wages.

In the gospel story, Jesus comes to Bethany to see Mary and Martha, and their brother Lazarus. They all surely know this will be their farewell in the final hours before Jesus’ death.
Mary brings out this wonderfully aromatic nard oil and anoints Jesus’ feet with it. She then wipes his feet with her hair.

Understand what she is doing:
Mary is preparing Jesus for his death with the most expensive oil imaginable.

Jesus, who cares for so many, who raises Mary’s brother Lazarus from the dead, who feeds the 5,000, who cures the sick and makes the lame walk, who gives living water to the Samaritan woman, and who makes the blind see – this one time, Jesus allows himself to be cared for.

There is another reference in the Bible to spikenard oil, from the Song of Solomon, which is a love song. Perhaps Jesus sings it this night:

“How sweet is your love, my sister … how much better your love than wine, and the fragrance of your oils than any spice!”

The love of Jesus in these final hours fills the room like perfume, and those who are in the room feel his love and hold his love in their hearts through the crushing crisis that is about to come.

Lest we forget, Judas is also in this room. The chain of events about to unfold will take both Jesus and Judas to their deaths.

But, for now, Judas asks a question, and it is not an unreasonable question:

“Why was this perfume not sold… and the money given to the poor?” Judas asks. Why, Judas wants to know, is this extravagant oil being used to wipe the feet of Jesus? Couldn’t this money be better spent on those who are destitute and in so much need? This is what you told us to do, Jesus.

The gospel writer whispers to us that Judas is a thief and has no intention of spending the money on the poor.

But that evades the question, and the question lingers unanswered in the room at Bethany – and lingers still in the air down through the ages to us:

Couldn’t that money be better spent on the poor?

“Leave her alone,” Jesus replies. “She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

You always will have the poor with you. That could be heard as an indictment of us.

Today Jesus bids us to linger awhile with him precisely because the poor are with us, and precisely because we have work to do tomorrow.

Today, linger awhile, be in the present with Jesus, gather your strength. Dwell in the love for these few moments.

You will always have the poor with you.

So first find the bread that will last forever, the bread for the journey in our worship – and be in the present with the Risen Christ who is with us here, now.
We know how to do this.

When I hear about Mary caring for Jesus, I think of all of the loving hands that have prepared this space for worship Sunday after Sunday, year after year, generation after generation.

I think of the loving hands that have pressed the linens, and those who have baked the bread, filled the cruets with wine, and in a few days, will arrange the flowers that will soon adorn this sacred space for Easter.

And I think of those who clean up after the rest of us have gone for the day. The poor are with us. But take strength from this place because the poor are with us.

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. And thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.

Be extravagant in worship, extravagant in love, and extravagant in serving the poor and all who are in need, everywhere.

And then let us go from here in peace, to love and serve the Lord.

AMEN