

**Strange Gifts****Lent 5C: John 12.1-8****April 3, 2022****The Rev. Scott Walters**

The other day, as I headed out for a run, I grabbed my phone, and hit play on an interview with Mikko Snellman, who lives in Finland and ties knots for a living. Mikko doesn't tie metaphorical knots, as in marriages. He makes a living doing something called "fancy work" with actual rope. In case you didn't know, "fancy work" is a subset of the much broader craft to which members of the International Guild of Knot Tyers are so deeply committed.

I'm guessing that there are several things in the first paragraph of this sermon you might find strange. There's the run itself. I had a friend from Peru who laughed at me one day when he saw me jogging and said, "Where I'm from, a grown man never runs unless he's being chased." So, I get it. Running is a strange hobby.

There's also the familiar strangeness of modern technology. Think about how weird it would sound to tell someone just a few decades ago to hear that you took a telephone with you on a run, since they would have been envisioning a device of about the size and heft of a gallon of milk, apparently with a really long cord. It also would have sounded strange that you used that telephone to play a kind of prerecorded radio story. Is there a tiny cassette inside the phone?

Or, maybe strangest of all, is that of all the listening possibilities available to a modern jogger on the internet, your preacher chose a podcast about a Finnish knot tyer named Mikko. It's strange, right? All of it.

Well, here's something else that's strange: the Gospel of John. If we're paying attention in the least, it's really strange.

Consider the story we just heard. We're conditioned to read the Bible as tasteful, wise, and appropriate. So, when Jesus shows up in a scene we expect to meet someone who will say something edifying and agreeable, like, "Consider the lilies." But that's not the Jesus of John.

Did you not stumble over any of the bizarre details in what we just read? There's a dinner party at the house of Lazarus, a formerly dead guy. His poor sister Martha is making preparations. It was just a few days prior, when Jesus was about to open Lazarus's tomb that Martha cautioned, as the King James Version put it, "Lord, by this time he stinketh." So, we know she's attentive to smells. Maybe because she's a cook.

Now, her sister Mary has poured a pound of pure nard on Jesus' feet and is wiping it with her hair. Pure nard. Which is an even stranger gesture than you might think. One aromatherapy manual describes nard as, "piercing, earthy, animal-like, reminiscent of goats." Sounds like it stinketh! But apparently nard is also so potent that a vial the size of your thumb would clear a room. This is the stuff Mary has just poured out, not a thimble, but a *pound* of onto Jesus's feet. It must have sent everyone in the house stumbling outside, gasping for air that doesn't remind them so pungently of goats.

This is not a subtle, tasteful, understated kind of gospel, and this is not a subtle, tasteful, understated kind of savior.

But there's more. Judas is at the meal, and John takes special care to make sure we realize he's a really bad egg. He tells us that Judas is a betrayer, and that he's a thief who doesn't really care about the poor. Then when Judas tries to stop Mary's strange, extravagant anointing of Jesus' feet, Jesus says, "Leave her alone. She's just anointing my body for burial." As if that's supposed to explain everything. Come on, Judas. Haven't you ever seen someone anointed for his own burial with a pound of nard at the dinner party of a formerly dead guy before?

The characters, the gestures, the smells in this story are bizarre. The scene could be dropped unedited into a Tim Burton movie. But what if we have to buy into the strange world of John's gospel before it can really go to work on our lives?

There's a dilemma or at least a tension in the Christian faith. Jesus's life needs to make some kind of intersection with our lives to be meaningful. But if Jesus's life fits too comfortably with ours, it may not make much difference to us. A too familiar Jesus just ends up affirming all our own habits and affections and pet peeves. And, let's face it. We probably think we're the kind of folks who would have been hanging out with Jesus if we'd lived in his day, don't we? We're Christians, after all. We're his kind of people. And he's our kind of people.

But yesterday, I heard Sam Shiberou, one of Calvary's youth, speak eloquently in front of the National Civil Rights Museum about how he had been challenged and changed by people precisely because their lives were so different from his. Immigrant classmates who spoke different languages, or friends who worshiped in mosques or synagogues. Read some of Sam's thoughts in the Daily Memphian piece on the event. The young may know better than any of us how crucial encounter with the strangeness of others is to our humanity.

So look around that living room in Bethany again. Who are you in this scene? The thoroughly wicked Judas? The recently dead Lazarus? Mary, dumping a year's wages on Jesus' feet in a nasal burning gesture of affection? Are you Jesus, to whom all this seems to make perfect sense? Grateful, but pretty nonchalant about the fact that Mary has just anointed him for burial?

This Jesus is not ours. His tastes, his manners, his friends are strange to us. And this may be something crucial to keep alive as Christian people—the strangeness of Jesus. The sense that he's *not* our kind of people. The sense that he is not ours.

Jesus has been used to defend chastity and polygamy, nuclear warfare and pacifism, free markets and socialism. And this isn't all bad. Our faith should impact how we live and the way we view our world in very real ways. But there's a seductive temptation to make Jesus one of us. Which is to place ourselves, and folks like us smack in the center of God's universe. But in the Bible, to be God's chosen people was to be in relationship with the wild, unpredictable source of holiness itself. And John's portrayal of Jesus may keep us a little closer to the offensive, startling, incomprehensible nature of God, even when God was incarnate.

What kind of difference might it make to our lives if we refused to let go of this gospel's strangeness? Well, our choice of responses to God in this story basically seems to be between that of Judas, and that of Mary. And, let's face it, Judas's response is the one that makes a more familiar sense. Maybe that's why John felt the need to keep reminding us of what a bad guy he was. But there are reasons for Judas's assessment of the situation. Mary's actions make no sense. Fifty full

time weeks of work in Memphis, even at the 2022 minimum wage, is \$18,500. How is using that much nard on Jesus's feet a good idea by any recognizable standards in our world?

But when we do let ourselves enter the strange world of John, an important contrast becomes stark. Judas, you see, "keeps" things. Mary pours them out. Judas kept the common purse, and kept a little extra of that for himself apparently. Mary's outpouring is absurd, wasteful, and somehow lovely.

Both of these people were responding to Jesus. But Judas calculated how being close to Jesus might be most helpful to Judas, which is just how we're taught to make our way in this world. But Mary opened herself and let something ridiculous be drawn out of herself. And Jesus lets us know that it's Mary's kind of response he's hoping to elicit from our lives as well.

When we let Jesus become too familiar, when we let him morph into someone pretty much like us, someone who approves of our tastes and habits and friends, whom do we resemble most? When we co-opt Jesus for our agendas, and preferences, and arguments, aren't we acting more like Judas than Mary? We're using Jesus for our purposes, reducing him to a comprehensible savior. But Judas is the one who actually wastes something precious in this story. Judas wastes the glory present in the house of Lazarus that day by deciding what to do with it in advance.

But when we keep Jesus a little strange, maybe we can live more like Mary, opening ourselves to whatever extravagant gift an encounter with the living God might draw out of us. A gift we've not yet imagined, perhaps. A gift our rational, sense making selves might rule out before it's ever called forth.

When asked how he got into the knot tying craft, Mikko Snellman got very quiet, and then he said, "Well, it was actually during a very hard time in my life." Mikko had been a cabinet maker, but after he and his wife had a child, he took a job for more money that required him to travel constantly, and he realized his son was growing up without knowing him. So Mikko and his wife relocated from Helsinki to a tiny island in the Baltic Sea. Life was simpler there. But life got very hard, as Mikko struggled to make a living. Eventually he started drinking and fell into a terrible addiction. He lost his job, his friends, his health. He lost his driver's license, his car. He almost lost his wife in an accident. Realizing he was going to lose his family as well, he entered a rehab facility. But Mikko realized quickly that he'd never make it through the program unless he found something to do with his hands. He remembered a sea captain's chest he'd once made. The intricate braids and knots of the rope handles were a mystery he had poured himself into solving for days. So he found a length of rope and began teaching himself to tie knots in what would be not only a lifeline to his healing, but also a strange craft that he had a talent for. And to this day, beautiful and unexpected things come from Mikko's hands into the world, as if poured out from someplace within him only God knew about once upon a time.

I wonder if carrying around a familiar Jesus makes me more inclined to hang onto familiar expectations, familiar habits of mind, familiar ways of being alive, even when those ways are no longer serving the world or leading to life. I also wonder whether encountering the strange Jesus of the gospels might still provide enough courage or surprise to explore more truthfully what our lives were really made to pour out into the world.

Because look again at what happens in Mary, in Lazarus, and in the lives of so many people Jesus encountered. In the presence of Jesus, people learned to stop clinging to what they'd been taught they couldn't do without, and found their lives pouring forth healing, and beauty, and even resurrection in ways they couldn't have imagined on their own. The gospel says that when we encounter this strange savior, healing, and beauty, and resurrection can pour forth from lives like

ours as well. The last, strange twist in the story being that somehow our own lives are the ones that get saved in the act of pouring out what they were made to give away in the world all along.