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Sermon 3 April 2022

Title: Give it Up for Lent: Used Up

- Good morning church family—we are so glad that you have joined us this beautiful Sunday morning—and we trust that you are being blessed and that you are especially aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit right there where you are right now—you know, I believe God has something powerful and life-changing to say to us this morning if we have ears to hear
- Wasn't that a beautiful song we heard before Pastor Tasha shared the scripture with us? His Eye is on the little sparrow and I know he watches me—that was Pastor Tasha's grandfather, Archie Abear, or Papa Abear as the family used to call him—he's Tasha's mother's father, and that video was made about 30 years ago in the church that my father had pastored and Tasha and I attended when we were younger—that song was sort of his specialty—and everyone always enjoyed it when he'd share it with us. But Papa Abear had another specialty that he used to share with folks, his family and his church and others, and that was his chicken stew. He used to make the most delicious chicken stew you ever tasted, and he had some secrets that he'd use to make it taste so good—like chopping the onions and freezing them before he cooked with them, then he'd sauté them low and slow in butter, and he'd use chicken on the bone in the broth—so the stock would be

just bursting with flavour—and he'd put in nice big chunks of potato—and I remember enjoying that chicken stew more than once when my parents and I would be invited to the Abear's house back when I was a teenager—and it was a tradition in Tasha's family on Sundays after church for everyone to gather around the big table in her grandparents' kitchen, cousins and uncles and aunts and Moms and Dads, and Mama Abear would make cornbread and Papa Abear would make his famous chicken stew, and the smell that would fill the kitchen—the whole house, really—the aroma was just incredible. Now as you probably could have guessed, Pastor Tasha made sure that Papa Abear taught her how to make his chicken stew, and so that's a recipe she breaks out every now and then—a few weeks ago when we had COVID Tasha made a big pot of stew and I am convinced that was part of the reason that we got better so quickly and didn't have anything more than mild symptoms. And not only did Papa Abear teach Tasha how to make that stew, but one Sunday some time before he died, Papa Abear made a big batch of stew and Tasha took some of it and canned it—preserving it in pint jars like this one—this isn't his stew but this is what it looked like in the jar—and she shared a jar or two of that canned chicken stew with her brother and some other members of the family, because they knew that Papa Abear wasn't gonna be around forever—none of us are—and as long as they had a jar of his chicken stew on their pantry shelf, they knew that someday, even when they didn't have him with them in the flesh anymore, they could open up that jar and remember—

and they could eat it in memory of him. But they'd want to save it, because once they opened it and used it up, it'd be gone.

- When Tasha and I were first married, I believe it was in the Springtime, just before Easter, we decided that it was time to open up our last jar of Papa Abear's chicken stew, and I'll never forget when we did—Pastor Tasha turned that lid and opened that jar—and poured that stew out, and that aroma filled our minds with so many memories—it was just like being back in that kitchen with all the family gathered around the table once again—and as the smell of that stew filled our kitchen and our house we just breathed it in, and it filled our hearts with joy and our bellies with goodness—and we ate it with a kind of respect, with a Spirit of reverence as we appreciated what Papa Abear had given us, and continued to give to us---and even so long after his death, he was still with us.
- Today we are continuing our Lenten sermon series, called "Give it Up for Lent," and we are nearing the home stretch—next Sunday of course is Palm and Passion Sunday, and that begins Holy Week—there are a lot of special services that will be going on here in Largs during that week, and you can read all about those in our newsletter that will be available next Sunday, and then of course the following Sunday is Easter Sunday, and Pastor Tasha will be bringing us the final sermon in this series. But for now we are still walking with Jesus toward Jerusalem and toward the crucifixion and resurrection, and in today's scripture we find Jesus in Bethany, where Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha live. Now Bethany is also where Lazarus died, and

was buried for 4 days, and was stinking up the place until Jesus finally showed up and raised him. That was when Mary told Jesus, “if you’d been here Lazarus wouldn’t have died.” That was just before Jesus commanded him to come out of the tomb.

- And in today’s scripture, found at the beginning of chapter 12 of John’s gospel, Jesus is having dinner with Lazarus and Mary and Martha, and Judas is also there, and John tells us that he doesn’t like what he sees when Mary uses an expensive oil to anoint Jesus feet.
- Now a similar situation, is described in the gospel of Mark, chapter 14 and also in Matthew 26, but in their versions, Jesus is still in Bethany but he’s at the home of Simon the Leper, and Mary and Martha and Lazarus aren’t mentioned—and an unnamed woman anoints Jesus with an ointment in an alabaster jar—and it’s not Judas who disagrees with what’s happening, but in Matthew, it’s the disciples, and in Mark it’s just some people who were there. But in both of their versions, Jesus says “you always have the poor with you but you will not always have me,” just as he also does here in the gospel of John.
- There’s also a scene in Luke 7—we looked at it back in September of 2019 in a sermon called “Accentuate the Positive”—where Jesus is anointed by a woman who is called a sinner at a dinner—and that dinner is hosted by a Pharisee--named Simon—and so there are several similar situations and similar names and places that can sometimes get confusing and hard to keep straight, but we are going to focus on John’s account today.

- And from a literary point of view, these first 8 verses of John's 12th chapter, this pericope, this chunk of scripture that can stand on its own as a unit, is just beautifully crafted, in my opinion. John begins by setting the scene, telling us when and where these events take place--it is 6 days before the Passover, just before Jesus enters Jerusalem and the familiar events of Holy Week that lead up to the crucifixion and resurrection happen—that's when it is, and where we are is in a house in Bethany—specifically the home of Lazarus, who Jesus had raised from the dead—and John tells us that Lazarus and his sisters are giving a dinner for Jesus—and with that information the stage is set—but in the first three verses John not only sets the stage, but some action takes place on it—and here in these first three verses, John tells us about the actions of the three residents of this house in Bethany—he tells us what they are doing. No dialogue happens in these first three verses, just silent activity, and it's the last of these three activities that evokes a response from the other two people who are named here by John—and what we hear from these two, namely Judas and Jesus, is a commentary on the action that has taken place. Judas makes a comment and Jesus responds to it—and disagrees with it as well—so this is a sort of a debate—a point and counterpoint contained in their commentary of what they have witnessed, the central action that takes place, which is an act carried out by Mary.
- And for just a little while this morning, I'd like us to consider these 3 actors, the folks who carry out activities here, and then these two commentators and

what they have to say about the situation—because I believe there are some meaningful messages that will arise as we open up these 8 verses in this way.

- And so first I want to look at the three actions of these three actors in verses 1 through three. And what I want to suggest to you is that in these three actions, John gives us three examples of people who are living out their faith, three people whose actions testify to the Lordship of Jesus and the power of God—and these three actions are still three important ways that we see followers of Jesus living out their faith and testifying to the Lordship of Jesus even today—and they are ways that we can do the same.
- And the first of these three actors is Lazarus, and what he does is this: Lazarus sits. John tells us that Lazarus sits-- at the table with Jesus.
- And you might be thinking to yourself, “well that doesn’t sound like any great accomplishment—that’s not much to emulate—that’s not much of an example to follow.” But I think that it is.
- Because John also reminds us that Lazarus is the one that Jesus had raised from the dead. And he had been in the tomb for four days before Jesus arrived. He was not just dead, he was decomposing—he wasn’t just lifeless, he was being consumed, eaten up, used up—and you’ll remember John mentions the smell of death—when Jesus commands that the stone be moved and the tomb opened up, Martha reminds him that a powerful stench is going to fill the air—in the King James version she says “he stinketh”—and John lets us know that detail to make clear that Lazarus was not nearly dead, nor

was he merely dead, he was really most sincerely dead-- like the witch in the Wizard of Oz when that house fell on her.

- But now here he sits at the dinner table enjoying his chicken stew—or his mince and tatties, or Tikka masala or whatever they were having.
- And now, Lazarus' very presence is testimony to the transforming power of God's grace—he has literally moved from death to life—Lazarus is a living testimony to God's power in the past, evidence of the way that God can take what is dead and breathe life into it—and Lazarus' very presence points to the resurrection that is yet to come
- What is Lazarus doing? Lazarus is at the table being fed, being present with his family and his Saviour—and I think that sometimes we forget what a righteous and holy thing it is just to come to the table and be fed—be nourished and strengthened, and just be present—that great poet John Milton, when he considered his blindness reminded us, “they also serve who only stand and wait.”
- Some folks bring glory to God by accomplishing great things, God does tremendous work through them, and their names are remembered for their noteworthy accomplishments, and some folks bring glory to God by making great sacrifices—giving generously to the Kingdom—and some, like Lazarus who simply sits at the table, testify to the transforming power of God's grace just by being a brand new creation—just by being alive and well-- and everything else is just gravy—Lazarus sits at the table.

- Our second actor here is Martha, and while Lazarus actions are a testimony to God's power in the past, Martha's actions are a demonstration of God's love in the present, and that's because Martha serves. Martha attends to the needs of others, in the here and now—she sees what needs to be done and does it.
- Oh, where would the church be without Marthas? Folks who don't just talk about the things that need to be done, but do them. Folks who put the love of Jesus into action, who love their neighbours as themselves, even without words they share the gospel with those around them—and without Marthas the church is little more than a museum, a social club, a theatre, but with them the church is truly the body of Christ, broken and poured out for the world
- I'll tell you I am so thankful that we've got a whole room full of Marthas on Sunday mornings, serving each other, meeting the needs of each other, feeding our family physically, spiritually and mentally, sharing not just food but fellowship and friendship and our prayers and compassion —and not just on Sundays but also every other day of the week folks in our church family are noticing what needs to be done and doing it—being the body of Christ in the community.
- Martha serves.
- And now finally our third actor in John's scenario is Mary, and it's Mary's action that is the catalyst for the conversation that takes place beginning in verse 4—what Mary does prompts a response from Judas, whose words

prompt a response from Jesus—and what Mary does that is so provoking is this—while Lazarus sits and Martha serves, Mary sacrifices.

- John tells us that Mary takes a pound of pure nard and anoints Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair—
- now nard is a precious essential oil that is used as a perfume and was also used in the preparation of bodies put into tombs—and it was costly—a pound of nard would have cost a years' wages—we'll see in a minute that Judas knows exactly what it's worth—but even today, when production is much more efficient and all we have to do is look on Amazon and order it, a little bottle of nard like this costs about ten pounds—and that's just for 10 millilitres—a whole pound—that would be as enough to fill this pint jar, because a pint's a pound the world around—that would cost about 500 pounds, so even today, nard is not cheap, particularly when you're talking about this much nard and not just a little bit like this—I believe the term for that is a nardini.
- And when Mary breaks open that container of nard, John tells us that the aroma fills the whole house—and I'll have this with me at church on Sunday if you'd like to know what that smells like—I think it smells sort of like cedar wood
- But John lets us know that the aroma is no longer contained but fills the whole house—even fills those who are in it because it's in the very air that they breathe when they inspire and expire—the Greek for that air is of

- course *pneuma*—spirit—that’s why we say someone inspires when they breathe in—or that they are inspired when they’re guided by the Spirit
- COVID has certainly taught us how a substance that’s in the air, like a virus, can be carried on the wind and get inside of us—that’s a bad thing when we’re talking about a virus, but a very good thing when we’re talking about a pleasant aroma or about the life-giving power of the Spirit of God
 - Now we said that as Lazarus sits he testifies to the power of God in the past, and that Martha demonstrates God’s love in the present, but Mary’s sacrifice, what she gives up when she empties out and uses up this pound of pure nard points us to the power of God in the future, as Jesus tells us that she has anointed his body for burial—Jesus makes them aware of what is coming in just a few days, and that is the crucifixion and his burial
 - Now we might wonder whether Mary knew what Jesus meant when he said she was anointing his body for burial-- When he said I’m not going to be around for much longer? I don’t know, but I do know that Mary had seen the power of Jesus over death and the grave, she knew that the stench of death could be transformed into the fragrant aroma of perfume
 - And what Mary is doing is demonstrating her absolute, limitless devotion to Jesus, the one who showed up when she had experienced irreversible, irreconcilable loss—when her brother was dead and buried and decomposing—beyond any hope—Jesus came and wept with her and felt her loss and turned to the tomb and said, “Take away the stone.”

- Mary had seen death transformed into life. Mary had seen what happened when Jesus showed up and what was lost was restored, how Lazarus had been bound in the tomb and was now sitting at the dinner table, and so I suspect she had no hesitation at using up a pound of pure nard to anoint Jesus' feet.
- I suspect she did so joyfully.
- I suspect she did so expectantly.
- She knew that what is emptied out will be filled, that what is used up will be multiplied, that death and loss have no dominion when Jesus shows up
- And so her sacrifice not only points to the tomb that lies in the future, it points to the fact that like this container of nard, that tomb is also going to be empty. But that's getting ahead of ourselves.
- Now we said that Mary's action prompts a response from Judas.
- Now it's certainly true that Mary gives extravagantly. She sacrifices to Jesus an offering worth a year's wages—and she does so in an extravagant way—this is a spectacle—she embraces the indignity of removing her hair covering and wiping Jesus' feet with her hair—this is an intimate and excessive gesture—it is over the top—and it may be that Judas, like Simon the Pharisee in Luke 7, feels that this gesture is improper—it looks bad, and it smells up the place while they're trying to have dinner—but on top of everything else, Judas thinks Mary is a poor manager of money, because she's just pouring cash out on Jesus' feet—using it up—when he wants to keep it for himself

- But Mary isn't concerned with what Judas thinks. Mary is not looking to Judas for approval. She's not looking to Judas for advice about table manners, or financial guidance, or even for counsel about how to address the socioeconomic needs of those less fortunate.
- But Judas gives his opinion anyway. And that's what I want us to notice about Judas—while Lazarus sits, and Martha serves, and Mary sacrifices—Judas critiques. And Judas critiques because while they're sitting, serving and sacrificing, he's looking to steal—to take what's meant for someone else and keep it for himself—while Mary is giving, emptying out, using up, Judas wants to hold tight, to cash in, to grab and keep and collect—while Mary is giving he's trying to take
- And we know that's what he's trying to do because John's omniscient narrator—that's a narrator who tells us what's going on in peoples' hearts and minds—tells us that not only is he going to betray Jesus, but he's also not really interested in the poor, but he's a thief.
- But you know I have noticed that it often happens whenever somebody is doing something good, or thinking about doing something good, somebody like Judas has to offer their opinion—I like to call these people “whatabouters.” They're they people who when somebody says something like “we ought to help the Ukrainian refugees or donate to the food bank” they say “but whatabout. . .” whatabout the homeless in Glasgow, what about the NHS, whatabout veterans—and the truth is that they're not really interested in helping those folks, they just don't want to help anybody

- And that's what Judas does—he says why use that resource up? Why not turn it into cash for me so I can hold onto it?
- And Judas isn't just greedy, he also doesn't understand how God's provision works—even when evidence of God's power is sitting right there at the table with him—Lazarus' time was up, his body was being eaten up, he was all used up, and yet here he sits--and so Judas speaks from the perspective of scarcity, even though he is in the presence of the one who brings abundance.
- Judas was there at the feeding of the five thousand—that was back in chapter 6 of John's gospel. Judas has seen the way that Jesus can multiply even what does not look like it's going to be enough into that which is sufficient for the needs of others with plenty left over. Judas has seen Jesus bring healing and restoration and reverse even the loss of life itself.
- But Judas looks at Mary's extravagant sacrifice and questions it—asking why didn't we turn this offering into cash? Why suffer a loss when we could have seen a profit? As if giving generously to Jesus would mean that there wouldn't be enough to give to others.
- Judas knows better. Judas has seen Jesus bring abundance from scarcity, life from death, fullness from emptiness, healing from brokenness—and yet he still asks “why didn't you sell this precious commodity? Why didn't you turn to the world's marketplace and rely on its system of exchange to give you what it's worth? Why would you waste it by just emptying it out for Jesus?”
- Judas has not learned how God's provision works—and so Judas critiques.
- But while Judas critiques, Jesus corrects and commends.

- Jesus corrects Judas, and commends Mary, saying you leave her alone, she's been saving that to anoint my body for burial—and then he adds a little jab at Judas when he says don't worry, you'll never run out of poor people to help—you'll never use up your opportunities to be generous—and that's what Jesus means when he says the poor will always be with you--Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy chapter 15 here, where it says "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land."—it's not an excuse for inaction but a challenge to be constantly willing to give what we have—whether it's time or energy or resources or just our presence—to be used—even to be used up in the service of the Kingdom
- And so it's with a bit of irony that Jesus can say here, you'll always have the poor with you but you will not always have me—because this is the same Jesus who says elsewhere I will be with you always, even to the end of the age—and that's an irony that we're reminded of when we realise that the Greek word that Jesus uses for have—when he says you will not always have me—it's a word that means to possess, to have, but it's not only a Greek word, it's also an English word—and the word Jesus uses there is echo—echo—that's when we send out a word and it comes back to us, we give it up and it returns—and so when he says that Mary is anointing him for burial Jesus is saying that like Lazarus, he will be put into a container, like that nard was, like Papa Abear's chicken stew was, and he will be emptied out, made nothing, used up—but the power of God demonstrates time and time again

that what is emptied out can be regenerated, transformed, exalted, magnified,

- And what we see through Mary's sacrifice is that only when that perfume is emptied out and given to Jesus does it fill the whole house and even the people in it—and that aroma will be carried on the wind—the *pneuma*-- out into the whole world
- And like the aroma of the perfume that is spilled out, used up, when he is emptied out Jesus will be exalted and his spirit will fill HIS house—as we saw last week the Spirit fills those in Jerusalem and moves out into all the world
- But Judas doesn't understand the paradox—he doesn't understand what it means that the one who loses their life will save it, that Jesus who is emptied out and made nothing will be exalted, that what is sacrificed for Jesus' sake is never really used up, because even though you can use up what resources you have, and use up what time you have, and what energy you have, you can't use up the power of God to restore and regenerate and refresh and renew—you can't use up God's provision—because as we sang this morning, “out of his infinite riches in glory, he giveth and giveth and giveth again”
- Whenever you feel used up from serving or sacrificing, remember that you can just sit at the table for a while—be fed and refreshed and renewed—there will always be opportunities to serve and to give—and you can use up your time and your energy and your resources, but you'll never use up the power of God to take what's been used up, emptied out, and make it new and abundant

- We're going to gather together at the Lord's table in a moment—we invite you to join us—take these next moments to gather the elements and then we'll celebrate together