

Fifth Sunday in Lent
April 3, 2022
Southampton, MA

Scripture: John 12:1-8

This dinner took place the night before Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey. It was shortly after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Between Lazarus' resurrection and this dinner, the religious authorities, fearing that the Romans would respond to Jesus' miracles by destroying both the Temple and their nation, plotted to execute Jesus. Knowing this, he laid low in Ephraim with the disciples before returning to Bethany to join his friends, Lazarus, Martha, and Mary.

Gathering with friends, rarely juxtaposes life and death as it did that evening. They could not ignore that Lazarus had been dead a short while before and was now alive. Mary anointed Jesus by pouring 300 denarii worth of nard, its value close to a year's wages, over his feet, a foreshadowing of his death. Nard's musky, woody fragrance filled the room in contrast to their recent memory of death's stench, which they all smelled when the tomb's stone was rolled away.

The dinner was the quiet before the storm. It preceded the next morning's confrontation between the kingdom of God, led by Jesus, and the Roman Empire, ruled by Caesar. That confrontation was a proxy for two ways of living, the way of life and the way of death.

Though a miasma of tension and anxiety surrounded them, within the room, it seemed calm. Jesus ate dinner with his close friends. It was a respite from all the people's expectations and hopes that he carried over the previous three years. Rather than serving everyone, he was waited upon. Mary's erotically sensuous anointing showed a tender love for her friend. The evening was a refuge from the death sentence that awaited him. He could lay down his burdens, even for those few hours.

Curiously, some of nard's aromatherapeutic effects are to relieve stress and anxiety, dispel nervous tension, and to soothe and calm. It has been used for meditation and prayer. Whether the calm in that room came from nard's fragrance or the simple gift of friendship, this was a necessary pause for Jesus on his journey to the cross. Despite the juxtaposition of life and death that evening in Bethany, Jesus nor anyone else seemed worried. Well, maybe Judas, but he was hiding behind righteousness to cover his criminality.

Jesus was in that moment. We can also express it as Jesus was mindful. He could not change the past and all that he did up until that moment, which culminated in his death sentence. He could do nothing to lift it either. Though he could have decided not to enter Jerusalem on a donkey the next morning, he would have denied his call, which in turn would have denied the salvation of all people, a heavy burden to bear. Jesus put his attention to his friends and all that he was experiencing that evening.

Typically, this story can take us into deep theological reflections across a broad range of topics. We can relate it to the wedding at Cana. We can connect it to the Last Supper. We can wrestle with the ethics of poverty. We can compare this story to the similar stories in the other gospels. Many of these reflections found their way into commentaries, and there are a lot of them. Mindfulness, though, is not the typical deep theological reflection. However, mindfulness plays an important part in our ability to live.

Each day we read the grim news from Ukraine and its ancillary issues, such as refugees and ominous concerns about tactical nuclear weapons. Recently, the ice shelf collapse in East Antarctica added to what we saw this past winter with less snow and more freezing rain and sleet as further evidence of climate change. Despite positive economic news, we also know people still struggle for their daily bread as evidenced by an uptick in the number of people needing

assistance from the Community Cupboard. Though we've been able to relax from some of the Covid protocols, we're waiting for the next surge. Then, there's our politics. We have real issues demanding attention. Yet, our political leadership seems to have a much larger investment in antagonizing the other party than finding ways to address our collective problems. The cultural wars are in full swing where racism is barely hidden and specious claims that LGBTQ people are grooming children are rising. And finally, at least for me, something doesn't feel right, a coarsening of behaviors and rising self-serving greed have generated undue stress and a pervasive cloud of anxiety that seems hover over everything.

Just as Jesus' mindfulness in Lazarus' house enabled him to set aside his death sentence, mindfulness will help us manage our stress and anxiety today.

This story, unlike many Bible stories, incorporated all five senses: sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell. John made clear that nard's smell filled the room. Certainly, sight as they saw each other and witnessed Mary anointing Jesus. Definitely sound as the conversations in the room. Touch. The soothing, silkiness of the oil and Mary touching Jesus' feet. And taste. This was a dinner. Food was served.

While mindfulness doesn't necessarily require all our senses, we should open ourselves to using all five senses. By doing that we make ourselves intentionally attentive to the present moment. Attentiveness to the moment is the crux of mindfulness. By putting our full attention to the moment, everything else become extraneous. By putting aside what is extraneous, we set aside our stress, worries, anxieties, and burdens. By engaging our senses, we open ourselves, ideally, to sensual pleasures, which may enable us to slow down; perhaps literally, "smell the flowers."

We can practice mindfulness throughout our day, in different settings. When we are mindful in social situations, we are completely present for the person or people around us, which makes the people around us feel that they truly matter. When we eat mindfully, the interplay of taste and texture in our mouths becomes heightened, which increases our enjoyment and appreciation.

Now that the weather is warmer and we can be outside, being mindful outdoors in addition to being attentive to what we see, we can be attentive to subtlety, such as the way light falls on a subject or even how light changes depending upon the hour of the day and the season of the year. Of course, we can see colors, how clover and dandelions colorfully accent a lawn or the rich riot of tulip colors. Dawn can be breathtaking as the sky's colors shift from dark blues and purples to rose to orange and finally daylight all in a matter of minutes. We can feel the breeze and be attentive to the temperature. We feel the warmth of the sun on our face. We open our ears to hear birds or maybe the rustle of the leaves when the wind blows. We can even smell rain in the distance. Mindfulness allows us to drink in the awesome beauty of God's creation and for a moment gain a small respite from whatever was weighing us down.

By practicing mindfulness, we carve out space amid life's pressures enabling us to revel in beauty, to enjoy friendships, and to appreciate life itself. In our mindfulness, we hand off to God what we're carrying so we can reconnect with ourselves.

When we think about Jesus, the gospel writers would occasionally make note that he went to be by himself. Those moments gave him a respite from the pressures upon him. This dinner with his friends was a respite from all that surrounded him in that moment. Pausing didn't change what was around him. It changed, however, how he responded. He could be more resolute to fulfill his call for our salvation.

That's a reminder for us. Being mindful doesn't change the surrounding circumstances. The change occurs within us and then, our response to the circumstances.

Practicing mindfulness is one way to find peace in a world that seems surreal and nonsensical. It's a way to release stress and anxiety. Mindfulness can be a moment's salvation in the middle of chaos. Mindfulness gives us for a moment a chance to rest in the palm of God's hand. Mindfulness enables us to travel on our journey in life, to resist its traps and snares, and to have a fleeting foretaste of heaven.