

“Abundant Life”

Over the past few weeks, we have been alternating between the Gospels of Luke and John. This is problematic because John is so different from the Synoptic Gospels¹ (Matthew, Mark and Luke). Even when the Gospel of John uses a passage similar to ones in the Synoptics, he does something different with it. Take today’s gospel reading for example.

As we heard Jesus has arrived in Bethany a village only two miles from Jerusalem. Bethany is the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. We met this family before when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. They are an unusual family for their time. Two sisters and a brother. They are not married, and they have no children. They keep house together, but outside of Martha’s busyness as a homemaker and host we do not know if any of them have a job. Yet somehow, they seemed to live comfortably enough that they could host Jesus and his entourage of twelve close disciples, untold other disciples, and the women who traveled with them and provided for them out of their wealth.

The scene in this passage is set with men reclining around a table as was the custom at that time. As they are eating Mary, Martha’s sister, enters the room and proceeds to anoint Jesus’ feet. She then uses her hair to wipe his feet. Judas Iscariot objects to the extravagance saying, “Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages.” The writer, in an aside, indicates that Judas wanted to steal the money for his own use. Jesus tells Judas to “Leave her alone,” because her extravagant act is as a precursor to Jesus’ death and burial.

This scene appears in all four gospels but with significant variations. One consistency is that it takes place in Bethany. Additionally, the host is always named Simon. However, in the Synoptic Gospels Simon is a leper while in John he is a Pharisee. That is, in the Synoptics he is an outsider while here he is one of the religious leaders.

In the Synoptic Gospels this woman has no name. she is called a woman of the city. While she is described as having many sins, “no specific sin is mentioned or need be inferred.”² In order to make the situation more dramatic some have implied that her sins were notorious and shameful. There has also been suggested, without proof, that the woman was Mary Magdalene.

In three of the Gospels Jesus notes that the perfume is to prepare his body in advance for burial. In one the entire act is a rebuke to Simon for his inferior performance as a host. In three of the Gospels the disciples as a group or Judas Iscariot alone object to the action of the woman because the perfume could have been sold and used to feed the poor.

¹ The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are referred to as the **synoptic Gospels** because they include many of the same stories, often in a similar sequence and in similar or sometimes identical wording. They stand in contrast to John, whose content is largely distinct. The term *synoptic*... comes via Latin from the Greek σύνοψις, *synopsis*, i.e. "(a) seeing all together, synopsis".^[n 1] The modern sense of the word in English is of "giving an account of the events from the same point of view or under the same general aspect".^[2] It is in this sense that it is applied to the synoptic gospels. Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synoptic_Gospels. Accessed April 5, 2025.

² *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* page 116 notes on Luke chapter 7 verses 36-50.

If we had time to study each of these versions of the anointing of Jesus, we would see that each writer uses the basic story to illustrate something important to a theme in that gospel. In the case of John, the theme is abundance. As Jesus says elsewhere in John, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”³

Repeatedly throughout the Gospel of John Jesus performs miracles with remarkable results. It starts with his very first miracle of changing water into wine at the wedding in Cana.⁴ The wedding has run out of wine and while Jesus thinks that it is not his problem to solve his mother insists that he do something about it. He could have changed one or two jugs of water into wine, but instead he changed six jugs of water each holding between twenty and thirty gallons into wine. That is between 120 and 180 gallons of wine. In modern terms that is between 600 and 900 bottles of wine. That is a lot of wine no matter which way you parse it.

Another miracle of abundance is the feeding of the five thousand. Here Jesus uses “five small barley loaves and two small fish” to feed a multitude. The people are not only well-fed but there are twelve baskets of leftovers.⁵ One more example is the post-resurrection appearance at the seashore. The disciples had been fishing all night without success. Jesus directs them to throw their nets to the right side of the boat and “When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.”⁶

Bible scholars call these “sign acts.” That is, actions that illustrate a larger idea. It is not just that Jesus creates copious amounts of wine, or makes a little food go a long way and with much left over, or that he helps the disciples haul in an extraordinary catch of fish. These are intended, especially in their accumulation, as signs to us of the abundant life that we have in Jesus.

Jesus wants us to realize that by living lives that God centered lives are rich in blessings. When our life is filled a deep and abiding relationship with God we have a life rich in joy and purpose. The miracles of wine, food, and fish are signs of the abundance. They are not the abundant life itself. It is what those who preach the prosperity gospel get wrong. They are focused on earthly things. They miss the point when they ask somewhat jokingly “What would Jesus drive?” He would not drive, he would walk. Walking got him close to the people two thousand years ago. He would do the same today.

Jesus and his followers lived lives of poverty. Yet their lives were full of blessings. It was not material possessions or earthly pleasures that made their lives rich but the indwelling love for God and the recognition of God’s love for them. Jesus wants such a life for us. Life is not who has the most money, toys, houses, islands, crypto currency, employees or whatever is the going status symbol. Life is about our relationship with God, and all of those other things get in the way unless we are very careful.

³ John 10:10 NRSVUE

⁴ John 2:1-11

⁵ John 6:1-15

⁶ John 21:1-14 NRSVUE

The Rev. Eugene LeCouteur
Emanuel Episcopal Church
Middleburg, Virginia

The Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year C.
8:00 a.m. and 10:30 a.m.
April 6, 2025

We must depend on God alone. The stuff may be fun, but you can't take it with you. Only your relationship with God travels with your soul into eternity. Develop that relationship now for an abundant life in the present and on into the life to come.