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“The house was filled with the fragrance of the oil” (John 12:3).

*Isa 42:1-7; John 12:1-11*

As a screenwriter, the author of the fourth Gospel prefers close ups and dialogue to crowd scenes. Today’s Gospel gives us words and gestures that reveal the tension between the actors and the hidden tragedies unfolding in many minds and hearts.

The setting is a celebratory dinner in the house of Martha and Mary and their famous, recently resuscitated brother, Lazarus. The feast is for Jesus, who is the talk of Jerusalem, on the cusp of victory after his triumphal entry. Mary interrupts the meal with an extravagant gesture, pouring perfume on Jesus’ feet and drying them with her hair. Judas speaks for the other disciples, all of them indignant at this leap ahead of the line by Mary in showing love for the Master, calling it a waste of money that could have helped the poor.

The evangelist, also known as “the disciple Jesus loved,” offers an aside to the audience, that Judas was a thief. His animus for Judas will deepen at the Last Supper, where Judas will again command center stage as the betrayer. From his favored place next to Jesus, his head resting on his breast, the disciple sees everything, including the piece of bread Jesus dips in the dish and gives to Judas, his friend, before he disappears into the night to finish his foul deed.

Back at the dinner in Bethany, Mary alone knew that Jesus was going to die, and so she anointed him for burial, her heart breaking over him like the seal of the flask

filled with precious ointment. He will honor her at the Last Supper by repeating the gesture and washing his disciples' feet, a sign equal to the institution of the Eucharist, which the fourth Gospel does not mention.

Both scenes reveal something equally heartbreaking. Jesus' greatest suffering was not the flogging, the thorns, the nails, the abuse of the crowd that had hailed him on Palm Sunday. It was the infighting, jealousy and cowardice of his closest friends. He will die a failure, a criminal, excommunicated, betrayed with a kiss and abandoned by those he had so patiently trained to carry on his mission.

The word passion describes both physical suffering and the throes of love, and in this love story Jesus suffers intimate wounds only lovers know. For redemption to reach the deepest recesses of the human heart, so capable of love but also of treachery, Jesus must endure the worst pain of all, to have the gift of himself rejected. Only then can God's mercy expose and heal the hardest sins of all, the crimes of the spirit that end in death. The resurrection must come from this ground zero, the hidden coil of evil, where an old, decaying world will die so that a new, fragrant one can rise.

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