



“LEGACY GRIEF”

SCRIPTURE: JOHN 12:1-8

GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

Sunday, April 6, 2025, The Fifth Sunday of Lent

The Rev. Dr. Marcia Whitney Mount Shoop, Pastor

John 12:1-8

12:1 Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 12:2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him. 12:3 Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus's feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. 12:4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 12:5 "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" 12:6 (He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) 12:7 Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 12:8 You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

There's a grief that can't be spoken—a sorrow that we carry that is hard to describe or even understand. It is deep in our bones, our cells, our nerve endings, our synapses. It is written in our DNA, in our immune systems, in our neural pathways.

Just like we bear resemblances of our ancestors—eye color, facial features, our gait, the ways we carry ourselves—we also bear the pain that they could not or did not metabolize, the trauma passed down through generations, the ways of moving and being that we have little conscious understanding of even as these inheritances shape who we are and how we can become.

Think more fragrance that comes and goes in the breeze, than sentences you can write down and analyze. These etchings of our ancestors in our souls and spirits are not a choice we make, not a thought we think—but something given to us in our earliest gestation of life.

Ancestors gift us with much wisdom and they give us that which they could not metabolize themselves. And we will someday be those ancestors, too—the ones who end our days where they end, with some frayed threads of what is still finding its full expression.

Mary had an intuition that Jesus needed cherishing, needed tenderness—she did, too. Mary and Jesus both felt in their bones that death was near, that a sacred transition was underway. Rather than bypass or override, they abide in that moment and call in the mysteries of the ways time gifts us with indelible opportunities to mark and to allow something to matter, to take up home place within us, within our collective experience and remembering of where we come from and what could have been.

There is pain and promise in this capacity to linger in a moment like this one that Mary and Jesus sensed into so many generations ago.

Judas' repulsion of such extravagant acknowledgment of grief is a mirror for us in our grief resistant culture. His feigned pragmatism is a cover for his own pain—his betrayal of Jesus will become his ultimate attempt to not experience the grief. He breaks relationship rather than have to feel the pain. And yet, he can't outrun the pain—it only becomes more debilitating when he tries to say it is not his to feel.

Judas shows us something humans can be prone to—avoidance that eventually leads to self-destruction, aversive behavior that eventually leaves us drowning in our own deferred pain, and intellectualization that attempts to defend against the depth of emotion that human existence entails.

Avoidance, aversion, and intellectualization are hallmarks of how white supremacy culture socializes us to defer and deflect pain and grief.

Today is a day to acknowledge the toll these cultural tendencies take on us collectively.

Today is a day to touch into even a moment of cherishing, anointing, tenderly tending to our ancestral grief.

This is not a day when it can all be metabolized once and for all—but is a day when we can sense into what it feels like to tell the truth about it.

We need rituals, we need space and place, we need room for being homesick for what was lost, what would never be, what was taken, what was destroyed, what remains only as fragments and feelings and far off intuitions that linger and whisper to us about who we are.

In America today, we are living in a withering attempt to stop us from collectively metabolizing our legacy grief. Our best hope as the human family is to find our way back home to each other, to gather again around a sacred fire where stories are evoked and

shared, to let tears and drumbeat and gestures of connection and support anoint us for a new life liberated from the secrets and the lies and the white washing of where we came from and who we are.

These are the words I can conjure up today.

My ancestors learned to be stoic in the face of pain. They internalized and tamped down. They restrained themselves. They quieted the stories so much that they are hard to come by.

They bought into whiteness, banking on a false promise of safety and respectability. They vacated their bodies to avoid the pain.

My legacy grief is dissociative, it is long suffering, it is hard working. It's an inheritance of sorrow, of solitude, of the life of the mind, of frayed relationships and familial ties.

And so coming here today into this community we share making space for us to feel and acknowledge this deferred grief with tenderness—this is my own attempt at a healing ritual.

The Presbyterian Church has been my family's tradition for generations back to France, Scotland, Ireland. This faith tradition aided and abetted in their formation around being allergic to grief, around turning to the intellect to defend against the pain the heart needs to feel sometimes.

And so coming to this space today and inviting us to feel—is a radical act for someone in my lineage.

In America today, we are in the grip of what happens when power rests in the hands of those formed as my ancestors were—to push away the shame and the grief—and to keep pushing even if violence is required to keep the truth from finding expression, to callous our hearts and to give into the cruelty.

Our collective grief work has been and will continue to be a profound act of resistance to the diminishment of our shared humanity that has come at the hands of white supremacy culture.

To be fully human is to love with an open heart. And to love with an open heart means grief is part of our work to tend to our full humanity.

May we let this be a tender moment of acknowledgement that this shared sorrow deserves to be anointed with our tears, with our extravagant love, and with our courage to feel it together.

Thanks be to God.