

Sermon Note: Unfiltered

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Introduction

Our culture is deeply influenced by social media and selfies, encouraging perfection, polish, and performance. We filter our photos, edit our words, and present the version of ourselves we think will be most accepted. But every now and then, someone breaks through the noise with an act so honest, so vulnerable, it cuts through all the bravado and goes straight to the heart.

As we continue our #JesusTrending series, we encounter Mary—who doesn't hold back. She pours out expensive perfume on Jesus' feet in an unfiltered expression of love. Some scoff at her. Others miss the point. But Jesus doesn't. This week, we're invited to consider what it looks like to love with that kind of boldness—honest, imperfect, and all in.

Illustration Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HceqAAw60vQ>

In *Instant Family* (2018), Pete and Ellie open their hearts to Lizzy—not with perfect words, but with the promise of lasting love.

Why This Video?

In *Instant Family* (2018), a foster daughter named Lizzy is understandably guarded. As the oldest of three siblings placed with Pete and Ellie, she's had to grow up too fast, and trusting people—especially adults—doesn't come easy. Near the end of the film, Pete and Ellie finally break through Lizzy's defenses. She's been hurt, guarded, and unsure whether this family is for real. In this scene, Pete and Ellie—awkwardly but wholeheartedly—open themselves up to her. Their words aren't polished, but they are full of promise: not just a promise to love her in the moment, but to walk with her through the future—school, prom, graduation, even her wedding someday.

This isn't a transactional kind of love. It's stubborn, vulnerable, and maybe even a little foolish. But it's also honest. And sometimes, the most powerful thing we can offer someone is the assurance: "You were what was missing. We're not going anywhere."

Video Discussion Questions

1. What stands out to you in this moment between Pete, Ellie, and Lizzy? How do their words and actions shift the tone of the relationship?
2. Why do you think Lizzy has such a hard time trusting? How might her past experiences be influencing her response?

3. Pete and Ellie offer a vision of love that is awkward, imperfect, and yet deeply committed. Have you ever received love like that—from a friend, a parent, a mentor, or even from God?
4. In this clip, love isn't earned—it's offered. How does that challenge the way we often think about belonging or acceptance?
5. What do you think it means for someone to hear, "You were what was missing"? Why might that feel overwhelming or healing—or both?
6. Have you ever found yourself hesitating to receive love or grace because it felt "too good to be true"? What helped you move past that—or what's still holding you back?
7. What role does vulnerability play in this scene—for both Lizzy and her foster parents? How is that different from emotional control or self-protection?
8. How might this scene shape the way we think about God's love—especially when we're not sure we deserve it?
9. Pete and Ellie speak about being present in the future—at school events, graduations, and even a wedding. What does it mean to have someone promise to show up for you, long-term?

John 12:1-8 (CEB)

¹Six days before Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, home of Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.

²Lazarus and his sisters hosted a dinner for him. Martha served and Lazarus was among those who joined him at the table. ³Then Mary took an extraordinary amount, almost three-quarters of a pound, of very expensive perfume made of pure nard. She anointed Jesus' feet with it, then wiped his feet dry with her hair. The house was filled with the aroma of the perfume. ⁴Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), complained, ⁵"This perfume was worth a year's wages! Why wasn't it sold and the money given to the poor?" (⁶He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief. He carried the money bag and would take what was in it.)

⁷Then Jesus said, "Leave her alone. This perfume was to be used in preparation for my burial, and this is how she has used it. ⁸You will always have the poor among you, but you won't always have me."

Scripture Study Questions

Before considering these questions, read John 12 (above) and Psalm 126 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%20126&version=CEB>).

1. In Psalm 126, the writer writes of the unfiltered laughter and rejoicing that accompanied God's deliverance and restoration. How can recalling the great things the Lord has done for us sustain us in difficult times? Can you think of a time when you said, "I made it through that; I can make it through this"?
2. It's easy to become like Judas in John 12:1-8—standing apart from what's really happening in this moment between Jesus and Mary. Mary's extravagant gesture shows her surrender to the love of God made known in Jesus, while Judas seems preoccupied with the money being lost. It seems as if Judas can see only the monetary gain he loses out on. What ways can a Judas-like spirit infect our spirits?
3. John 12:3 tells us, 'The house was filled with the aroma of the perfume.' Some theologians have illustrated this as the 'fragrance of faith.' What does that idea look like in our lives?

4. What are some ways we can misread Jesus' words in verse 8, "You will always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me"? Does this suggest we can ignore poverty? How can we read this verse faithfully?
5. Judas uses the poor as a means to an end. He co-opts the language of solidarity with the least and the last for his purposes. Politicians and the powers-that-be are proficient at using pious language like Judas. Do Christians have a responsibility to speak out on behalf of the poor? What are faithful ways to do so, both publicly and personally?
6. Psalm 126 can be read as a reminder that suffering narrows our vision, but redemption lifts it. Where are you being called to speak or act with hope? What joy or laughter could be signs of God's restoration in your life or community?

Additional (Optional) Questions

Like the previous section of questions, please be sure to read Psalm 126. In addition, listen to "Cover Me in Sunshine" by P!nk and Willow Sage Hart (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vGZhMIXH62M>).

"Fill me with laughter." This is not what we expect so deep into the season of Lent. We are supposed to be getting more serious the closer we get to Good Friday, right? Or, perhaps Psalm 126 is right on time. Laughter, stories, and memories of God's provision are necessary at all stages of our journey with God as individuals and family in Christ. They shore up our faith and feed our hope. They remind us that God's goodness still infuses all creation and God's love remains steadfast. So, as you listen to "Cover Me in Sunshine," take in the words and consider how they might serve as a prayer, a call to God to bring sunshine and laughter as reminders of God's sustaining and life-giving love.

1. 1. What does Psalm 126 say about laughter? What do verses 5 and 6 have to do with the transformation that happens between sorrow and joy?
2. How does "Cover Me in Sunshine" echo the idea of moving from sorrow to joy?
3. In the song, the main artist is singing alongside her biological daughter. Can you name a time when you connected with someone in a different generation and sparked joy?
4. We often pray in difficult times for hope and support, like some of the psalms from earlier weeks. We can also pray prayers of thanksgiving when we experience joy or happiness. When was the last time you prayed a "thank you" to God and what was it about?
5. During the Easter story, especially during Holy Week (which is not far away), Jesus and the disciples move from the darkness of Jesus' suffering to the joy of his resurrection. Are there phrases in Psalm 126 and "Cover Me in Sunshine" that point to a similar journey or transformation?
6. Psalm 126 was written for people who had experienced captivity and exile but hoped for a new future. How might that compare to the struggles people go through today—such as refugees, displaced persons, or those feeling spiritually lost? Be sure to think both locally and globally.
7. Some people struggle to believe in joy and restoration when life is difficult. Do you think faith requires us to always feel joyful, or does it mean holding onto hope even when joy feels far away? Do you think it's possible to feel joyful all the time? Why or why not?
8. What do you think it means to trust in God's promises, even when you don't see them fulfilled?

Weekly Action

This week, take a step toward offering or receiving love without conditions. Write a short note or message to someone in your life—not to fix anything or prove anything, but simply to express care, encouragement, or gratitude. If receiving love is hard for you, pause each day to ask: What would it mean to accept love without earning it today? Journal your response, or share your reflections with a trusted friend or spiritual partner.

Prayer

Help us, Lord. Help us this week to follow in the footsteps of Mary who gave her all to you, unfiltered, and practiced radical generosity. Alert us to those parts of ourselves we hold back from you. Let our lives give out a Christ-like fragrance that is unmistakable and always honors you.