When I was seven years old, I moved with my family from New Jersey to the Chicago area. I have a memory from the months before we moved of walking into the kitchen one day and seeing my parents painting the walls. I really liked the color of the new paint; it was a pretty green. I asked them why they were painting now when we are about to move. And they explained that they thought a fresh coat of paint would help sell the house. I thought that was just so funny that they would paint as we were leaving and we wouldn’t get to enjoy the new look. I’m guessing many of us have a similar story to tell. I try to remind myself of this life lesson when I’m stalling on a project, like replacing my broken, built-in microwave.

To take this life lesson a step further, I heard a lecture given by a college professor on Achieving Your Childhood Dreams. Here are some of the ideas that he offered. Never lose the childlike wonder. Get a feedback loop, and listen to it; it’s how we learn about ourselves, our thoughts and behaviors. Find the best in everybody. Tell the truth. Apologize when you mess up. Help others. Show gratitude. The man who gave this lecture was Randy Pausch. He was a Computer Science professor at Carnegie Mellon. This lecture was part of a series entitled The Last Lecture. Professors who participated were asked to give their last lecture, so to speak. If you had one last lecture to give, what would it be? The title of this lecture series took on new meaning with Randy’s lecture. One month before he was set to give the talk, he learned that his pancreatic cancer had returned and he had three to six months to live. At the end of the talk Randy said that the lecture wasn’t really so much about achieving your childhood dreams as it was about how to lead your life. In the light of death, listen once again to his wisdom. Never lose the childlike wonder. Get a feedback loop, and listen to it. Find the best in everybody. Tell
the truth. Apologize when you mess up. Help others. Show gratitude. In the light of death, this advice holds more weight, doesn’t it? It purveys some urgency. Perhaps this wisdom, in the light of death, invites us to pause and reflect. Perhaps we consider how we might be prioritizing our accomplishments over our behavior. What if we learned to live in the light of death? What if the context of death served as a light?

Context is so important in our Gospel lesson today. Jesus is at the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary; they were siblings. Jesus has just recently raised Lazarus from the dead. In that act, Jesus is fully revealed as God’s Son. Jesus is resurrection and life. Now we are at the home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha. It is six days before the Passover; six days before Jesus will share a last meal with the disciples, a last meal before he is crucified. At the Passover meal, he will wash the feet of the disciples. He will wash their feet to try one last time - his last chance in his full humanity - to demonstrate God’s profound love and to draw us all into life lived with God, life lived for one another… in just six more days. This night, Jesus is having dinner with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, and in the light of death, Mary kneels down and anoints Jesus. She washes his feet with a pound of costly perfume. “In the raising of Lazarus, Jesus is fully revealed, and in Mary’s anointing of Jesus, faithful discipleship is fully revealed” (The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1995, p. 703). In the light of death, Mary anoints Jesus. Put yourself in that room. We feel Mary’s love for Jesus, the man who taught her justice and righteousness, the man who brought her brother back to life, the man who showed her God’s peace. In the light of death, Mary kneels at Jesus’ feet and anoints him and we feel her sadness for losing the man who has taught her how to love.

Context plays another important role in this text. Six days before Jesus shares a last meal with the disciples, six days before Jesus washes the feet of the disciples, Mary already gets it. Mary washes Jesus’s feet and discipleship is fully revealed through a woman. The message is
that all are invited into discipleship. Women were second-class citizens. They were rarely seen outside the home. If they were in public, men were prohibited from conversing with them. Women were not allowed to study the sacred texts. They were not allowed to testify in a religious court. If discipleship is fully revealed through a woman, then discipleship is fully for all. All of us.

Do you have parents who are aging? Are you more attentive to finding time to call them or to visit them? Do you have a friend who is dying? Are you making time to show your love and support? Are you aging or have you received a difficult diagnosis? Are your priorities shifting? Death is a part of life. It will come for all of us. We all know fear. We all know anxiety and concern. We all can know peace. Our faith helps us to move from fear of death to expectation of light and life. The context of death need not be fear, but light. Through the raising of Lazarus, Jesus “defeated death’s power to remove people from life with God” (The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX, p. 693). And, then, Mary shed a light on faithful discipleship. She confronts us with the preciousness of life and the opportunity to live each day with God and for one another.

We don’t need to get wrapped up in the dating of homo sapiens to acknowledge that our story as people of God’s Creation spans hundreds of thousands of years. We are just one chapter, one short chapter. No matter how long we live, days or months or years or decades, time is short for all us…every day is precious. What if the context of death served as a light? How would we prioritize the coming week? Will we seek God’s love in every encounter? Will we see Jesus in one another? Will we allow the Holy Spirit to inspire us? Will we strive for justice and peace among all people? Will we respect the dignity of every human being? Will we love our neighbor as our self?