

5th Sunday in Lent
March 17, 2013
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“LESSONS FROM ANOTHER PRODIGAL”

Isaiah 43:16-21 John 12:1-8

A woman anoints Jesus with costly ointment. This story appears – in some form – in all four gospels. Except for John’s account, the woman is anonymous. Only John identifies Judas as the one who objected to the expense of the gift. Only John places the story in the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. This is one of the times we may be glad to have four perspectives on an event in Jesus’ life.

Outside of The Twelve Mary, Martha and Lazarus arguably were Jesus’ closest friends. With them, he didn’t have to deal with the tension of competing personalities among the Disciples. With them he didn’t have to talk politics or religion, or worry about how finally to get his message across to the ones who would be carrying on after him. With them he could relax and find a little peace – away from the “office,” so to speak.

No wonder, when the hour rapidly approached when Jesus would enter Jerusalem for the last time Jesus chose to spend a little precious time with these friends.

In John this event follows almost immediately the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead – an act which added fuel to the fire of the plot to be rid of this Jesus. Not surprisingly, Jesus’ opponents believed he must either be a sorcerer or in league with Satan; no one has *this* kind of power. And so, with Lazarus at the table, the dinner might have been a celebration, but for the fact that everyone knew Jesus would soon face dire consequences with his public entry into Jerusalem.

While everyone was reclining at the table, Mary brought into the room a jar of perfumed ointment. She sat down next to Jesus, broke open the seal on the ornate alabaster jar, and began to pour the ointment over Jesus’ feet. A deep and pleasant fragrance filled the entire house. After she had anointed him she began to wipe Jesus’ feet with her hair.

There is no way that anyone could *not* pay attention to what Mary was doing. All conversation would have stopped; all eyes turned to look at her. First of all, pouring this ointment out was the financial equivalent of popping handfuls of hundred dollar bills into the fire again and again. If that were not shocking enough, Mary’s actions – taking down her hair, caressing Jesus’ feet and wiping his feet with her hair – was embarrassingly intimate; the kind of thing a wife might do for her husband – and then only in private.

Judas was appalled and disgusted by what Mary was doing, and he was angry with Jesus for letting her get away with it. “Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” Judas demands. He is calling Mary’s act the way he sees it; absurd and wasteful.

But Jesus reprimands Judas. “Leave her alone,” he says. “She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.” The irony is profound, for Jesus knows not only that his burial is not far off, but also that Judas will play an important part in bringing about Jesus’ death.

Why did Judas make such a big deal over this? Well, the ointment Mary used, nard, or “spikenard,” as it is sometimes called, was imported from India; it was the most expensive ointment available in Palestine at the time. This little jar, John tells us, was worth *a year’s wages*; extravagant by any standards. And Mary poured it out over the feet of Jesus.

Is this a ridiculous price for a jar of perfume? Yes. Even today there is barely a modern equivalent. I managed to find one: Clive Christian No 1. Sixteen ounces will cost you \$31,650. Unless you want the limited edition polished Baccarat crystal bottle, with a five-carat white diamond set in the cap, sealed with an 18-carat gold collar. In that case, perfume and bottle would come to just about \$435,000. This was the caliber of stuff Mary was pouring out on Jesus' feet. Ridiculously expensive. Extravagantly wasteful. But that's the point.

Now we, as listeners, are presented with a dilemma: is Judas right in calling Jesus to task for wasting resources? Or is Mary right in her lavish, intimate display of love and affection? As in many of Jesus' teachings, the listener is faced with extreme contrast and a difficult choice.

Now John stacks the deck in his account of this story. On the one hand we have the lovely, kind Mary of Bethany, who has already (in another story) proven her devotion to Jesus. On the other hand we have Judas, whom John reminds us, was a blackguard of the lowest order. Who would dare to side with Judas? So, you see, there is a reason John places the story in this setting, and there is a reason he has Judas be the spokesperson for the side of prudence and caution. But in truth and in real life, a decision for extravagance and against judiciousness is never so clear or so easy.

If the story consisted only of Mary's gift and intimate gesture, we might consider the story to be simply an example of faithfulness and devotion to Jesus – which it is, of course. But when Judas enters the picture the story becomes much more profound. For when we set the actions of Mary next to the response of Judas we have, boldly stated, one of Nine Great Teachings of Jesus: **Live life from a place of abundance, rather than a place of scarcity.**¹

Time and time again we see this message in the teachings of Jesus. Just last week we saw it in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The word prodigal, of course, *means* "extravagantly wasteful." In the parable it was not only the son who was wasteful (with material things), but also the father whose love and grace and forgiveness were "prodigal." In the story for today it is Mary's gift that is extravagantly wasteful. And, as we have seen, Jesus affirms Mary in this; Jesus does not affirm Judas, who sees the perfume only for its monetary value.

Judas misses the point that Mary's gift is an expression of her love and devotion. But more than this, we see in Mary one who is living out of the place of abundance. It does not occur to her that this gift is "too much." She gives it freely, without holding anything back. There is no fear in her; she doesn't hesitate to give all she has, for hers is a world not only of faithfulness and devotion, but of abundance.

I believe this is the primary point of the story, for it is something Jesus very much wanted his disciples to understand, and to live by.

But there is more to the story. Nard was used for anointing the dead. Jesus was aware that in Mary's generous act she has boldly reminded him of what soon will be taking place. While the other disciples deny what Jesus has told them—that he will soon die— she accepts this most difficult fact, and openly mourns for Jesus. She alone shares this deep sorrow with Jesus, and he is moved both by her compassion and by her courage.

Judas was thinking about the survival of their mission. The other disciples, in trying to protect Jesus and deny the necessity of Jesus' death, were trying to protect their Lord and Master—concerned about *his* survival. What they failed to see was that the power of the gospel has little to do with the physical survival of an institution, or even with the survival of the earthly lives individual disciples.

¹ The Nine Great Teachings of Jesus are found in the nine lessons of the Lord's Prayer

The power of the gospel—and that which has to do with its true survival—is in selfless service; in living for others, not just ourselves. And this is what Jesus saw in Mary's actions, however extravagant. There is nothing in what Mary is doing that is for her own benefit; she may have actually been risking the financial survival of her family by pouring out such a vast resource. Unconcerned about what others might think, her drying his feet with her hair is shamelessly intimate, warm and affectionate. She is behaving selflessly, and her love for Jesus is apparent. It is just this kind of selfless servant love that Jesus has been modeling for his disciples. Perhaps Mary's humble, simple act of washing Jesus' feet moved Jesus to do the same for his disciples in a few days, as they gathered in the Upper Room for the Passover meal, which would be for them the Last Supper.

What about you? Are you hopelessly wrapped up in the striving for survival of one kind or another, or are you committed to service? What kinds of changes would you have to make to stop all the fork-stabbing and knife-slicing that pierces your life? What would it take to replace those actions with selfless service?

As the week of Jesus' passion unfolds where will we be? Will we find ourselves in that crowd? Will we be shouting our hosannas and mingling with the others who have such high hopes and great expectations, all based on the belief that Jesus will throw out the Romans, or whatever it is that threatens our security these days? Or, in these coming days, will we try to learn the simple path of service? Mary, in her selflessness, shows us how.

Grace, mercy and peace. Amen.