

JOHN 12:1-11

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ²There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” 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.) ⁷Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.” ⁹When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, ¹¹since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

A Precious Gift April 7, 2109

Several years ago when my grandmother was still living I visited her in the hospital in Florida. My grandmother was never an easy person to live with and had sort of a tough exterior that often made her sort of intimidating and hard to please. But here in the hospital, she was feeling puny and maybe even a little bit afraid. She was having trouble with her heart. One evening my mother and I were with her and as she lay in her bed she had her feet sticking out the end of her covers. I asked her if she would like me to massage her feet for her. She was skeptical at first, even a little leery, having your feet touched by others is kind of personal and can make you feel vulnerable, but she agreed to let me. I was very gentle and she soon was able to relax and drift off to sleep. The next evening, she wouldn't let me leave until I massaged her feet again. I think that was the most personal and physical/spiritual moment I ever had with her and I only remembered it as I was reading the story of Mary anointing Jesus' feet.

Parker Palmer who is a Quaker elder and educator shared a similar story during a time he was suffering from severe depression and during one bout of it he spoke about those who came to try and help him out of the emotional hole he was in. While there were many well-meaning folks who came to his aid there was one in particular that stood out. He shared it this way, “Blessedly, there were several people, family, and friends, who had the courage to stand with me in a simple and healing way. One of them was a man who, having asked my permission to do so, stopped by late every afternoon, sat me down in a chair, knelt in front of me, removed my shoes and socks, and for half an hour simply massaged my feet. He found the only place in my body where I could still experience bodily feeling—and feel connected with the human race.

He rarely spoke a word, and when he did, he never gave advice but simply mirrored my condition. He would say, “I can sense your struggle today,” or, “It feels like you are getting stronger.” I could not always respond, but his words were deeply helpful: They reassured me that I could still be seen by at least one person, life-giving knowledge in the midst of an experience that makes one feel annihilated and invisible. It is almost impossible to put into words what my friend's ministry meant to me. Perhaps it is enough to say that I now understand the Biblical stories of Jesus and his foot washings at a new depth.”

I don't know if Jesus was at all depressed but he and all those with him were probably worried and concerned about the days ahead. Jesus has returned to the suburbs of Jerusalem just a few days before the Passover. Jesus has come home to be with some of the people whom he loves and cares for. They are like family to him and are not just disciples. Martha and Mary and Lazarus are people that are special in his life and for whom tears have

been shed and miracles performed. And they have gathered for a meal before he moves on to what awaits him in Jerusalem and some of them are thinking about that even as they work together to fix dinner.

Martha, of course, is in charge, working in the kitchen. Laz might even be in there helping; that's what she calls him...Laz. She'll tell him when to stir the stew, that's just what she does. Mary is probably off doting on Jesus or sitting quietly thinking deeply about all the things that have led them to this point. She is a deeply spiritual person and she loves Jesus and I am pretty sure he loves her too. The last time we saw them together was four days after Lazarus died and was buried and she knelt at his feet and wept causing Jesus himself to weep for this dear friend. And then there was the miracle of the resurrection of his friend that caused all the ruckus with the Pharisees and scribes. They want him gone! They want them both dead and gone, and the plots have begun to circulate. You know how these stories get started, and soon the whole village knows that Jesus and Lazarus are headed for trouble. The smell of death and burial is a strong character in this story.

Dinner is served and they gather and eat and share stories. Suddenly Mary leaves the room and soon returns with a bottle of costly perfume and kneeling at Jesus' feet she takes off his sandals and lovingly pours oil that is rich and powerfully scented onto his feet and massages them with loving hands. She then wipes his feet with her hair and all the while everyone else is either looking uncomfortable or wondering what in the world is going on. This is a deeply personal and very sensual moment. Can you imagine having a woman that you love anoint your feet with oil and then wipe them with her hair? Wow! What a moment that must have been. We don't talk about sensuality in the bible very often, but this is one of those moments that you can't help noticing. This is a love story that goes beyond words. Deeply loving and deeply spiritual all at the same time. Paul says in 1st Corinthians that a woman's hair is her glory and I can't help but get this theological image that she has wiped his feet with her glory, with her very best gifts of love and honor. Completely vulnerable, completely in the moment with Jesus. A beautiful picture of anointing him with her love.

Barbara Brown Taylor thinks that Mary is acting like a prophet in this moment and like all prophets, they say and do unexpected things and the message she has for Jesus is that this is his anointing for his burial which will certainly happen if he goes to Jerusalem. This might be a moment that was meant just for Jesus and explains a little bit why he rebukes Judas and the others to leave her alone. He gets it. They may not see it, but he does. This is about what comes next and she has reminded him of it by this extravagant gift of anointing. That he has been called to bring reconciliation and restoration to God's children and the path leads right to Jerusalem, and death, and ultimately...resurrection.

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette shared this wonderful version of our reading in music using the hymn O Jesus, I Have Promised. I thought it spoke powerfully about the precious gifts we bring to God.

The Lord Went to a Dinner

*The Lord went to a dinner, and Mary took perfume.
As she anointed Jesus, the fragrance filled the room.
She'd sat as a disciple, she'd been a faithful friend,
and now, with costly fragrance, she honored Christ again.*

*Soon Judas was complaining, "This gift could have been sold;
We could have helped the poor here — the young ones and the old.
Yet Jesus said, "My people will always help the poor,
but Mary chose to give this — to me, her dying Lord."*

*Her gift was her expression of thankfulness and praise,
and so it makes us wonder, in these long Lenten days:*

*What would we give to Jesus if he sat at our meal?
What gift would be our kindness and what would it reveal?*

*O Lord, today we offer the best that we can bring —
our worship as a fragrance, our love, an offering.
And now, as we're reminded the poor are with us still,
we pray that we may serve them — to honor you, as well.*

“Our worship as a fragrance, our love, an offering.” Fragrance is a powerful aspect of this story. In a commentary by William Barclay, he draws attention to the verse that says, “The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.” He suggests that John often has double meanings for things; those on the surface and those just underneath, and that many take this verse to mean that the whole Church was filled with the sweet memory of Mary’s lovely deed. “A lovely deed becomes the possession of the whole world”, he says. “A lovely deed brings into the world something permanently precious, something which time cannot ever take away.”

And so, it has me wondering about the precious gifts we bring to Jesus today. Gifts that we might lay at his feet and offer him our very best. In a little while, we are going to come to another table where Jesus is the host but one that reminds us of other foot washings. And I’m thinking about what gifts I might anoint Jesus with today? What precious gifts might I share that would further his kingdom? Perhaps, it could be the precious gift of forgiveness or patience or forbearance. The precious gifts of love, or inclusion, or acceptance. The precious gifts of hard work, or plumbing, or teaching, or gardening. The precious gifts of service to others, feeding the poor, visiting the lonely or walking together the difficult roads of addiction and life. Because for me, the thing that I get from this reading is that Mary’s gift was excessively abundant. It was over the top, it was beyond what was expected, and it gave such an aroma, such a powerful scent that it could literally mask the smell of death. That’s what its literal purpose was. But John means for us to notice that it is also a powerful metaphor for us if we consider that the gifts you bring to Christ this day and every day are so powerful, so full of the aroma of Love, that they hold at bay the powers of death and destruction, of hatred and cynicism, in our world. That when we give our extravagant gifts of love to God, we too bring reconciliation and restoration and dare I say, resurrection, to our homes, our communities, and to our world.

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Let us pray.

Loving God, we come in the stillness of this moment to be in your presence. To share once again a holy meal and be washed in the overwhelming aroma of your all-inclusive sacrificial love. We pray that the fragrance of your love and care for others will be revealed in our lives and actions as we seek to be your faithful children in a weary world. And as your children we pray for others this day and ask that you hear our prayers for those both far and near.

We pray that your love would wash over those who are caught in the midst of war and conflict, for those seeking asylum and safe haven for their families, for those who are desperate and lonely, for those who have yet to experience you deep and abiding love. Watch over this world, loving God, a world that should reflect your glory but often is marred by our greed and selfishness. Forgive us for not being better stewards of this glorious planet and all her creatures. Help us to do better.

We remember those in need here at home. Those who are recovering from illness or surgery, those who are caring for others, those who are seeking meaningful work and purpose, those who are lonely or depressed, those living through addiction, those who comfort and care for us all. Surround them we pray with your holy Spirit and give them such comfort as can be found. And give us courage to care for one another. To wash one another's feet when needed and to give of ourselves in ways that serve your kingdom. And hear now our prayers for those we hold dear as we place them in your tender care with our prayers both spoken and silent.

As you cause the sun to rise, O God, bring the light of Christ to dawn in our souls and dispel all darkness. Give us grace to reflect Christ's glory; and let his love show in our deeds, his peace shine in our words, his healing in our touch, that all may give him praise, now and forever. For we ask all this in his name who taught us to pray saying...