

“The Anointing at Bethany”

John 12:1-8

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“Six days before the Passover....” This story takes place on the last Saturday of Jesus’ earthly life. We are almost at the very end of Jesus’ ministry. For him, that was a period of about three years; for us, it has been a period of about three *months*, since we commemorated his birth, and his epiphany, and his baptism. We have covered just a few of the many events of his ministry. Even the Gospels don’t tell us the whole story; we are not given a day-by-day account of how Jesus spent those last three years of his life. We are just told some of the highlights. There is a great deal that we do not know.

But the Gospels all tell us, in pretty clear detail, how Jesus’ earthly ministry came to an end. In the Gospel of Mark, the last week of Jesus’ life takes up about a third of the book; here in John, it occupies nearly *half* of the Gospel: eight whole chapters, beginning with this story that took place on the Saturday just before his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and ending with his burial the following Friday.

So, you could say, this story marks the beginning of the end.

“Jesus came to Bethany.” Bethany was a town situated on the southeastern side of the Mount of Olives, less than two miles from Jerusalem. Jerusalem was, quite literally, just over the hill. At that time Bethany was probably not much more than a small village, although the evidence suggests people had been living there for six hundred years. Bethany still exists today, although it is now much larger – some 22,000 Palestinians live there – and it is commonly known by its Arabic name: al-Azariya, which means, “Place of Lazarus.” Lazarus was Bethany’s most famous resident, the Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead. We didn’t cover that story this year, but you can read it in the eleventh chapter of John. Lazarus, a friend of Jesus, had died. His body was laid in a tomb. Four days later, Jesus, declaring himself to be “the resurrection and the life,” called Lazarus to come out of the tomb. The man who had died came out fully alive. That event was the final sign that Jesus performed that revealed his glory.

A little time has passed, and Jesus is once again in Bethany, visiting his friend Lazarus, and Lazarus’s two sisters, Mary and Martha. The three of them host a dinner for Jesus and his disciples. “Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.” What was Mary doing? Was she helping out in the kitchen? No; remember, this is the same Mary we hear about in Luke’s gospel, in the well-known story about Mary and Martha. In that story, Martha was busy doing many tasks, but Mary was sitting at Jesus’s feet, listening to what he was saying. Jesus told Martha that “Mary has chosen the better part” and invited her to set aside all her busywork to sit and listen, to learn and grow.

A similar scenario plays out now. Martha is busy serving. But Mary “took a pound of costly

perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair." Nard is an amber-colored essential oil that was used in making perfume and spiced wine. It comes from a honeysuckle plant that grows in the Himalaya Mountains in India, China, and Nepal. That was a long way away. It was not native to Israel. It was an expensive foreign import. It is only mentioned five times in the entire Bible – three times in the Song of Solomon, in conjunction with other exotic spices and ointments – and twice in the New Testament; here in this story in the Gospel of John, and in a parallel story in the Gospel of Mark. Perfume made from nard was not something that the average person in Israel would have had. The fact that Mary had some indicates that she was a woman of considerable wealth. Indeed, Mary didn't just have *some* perfume made from nard; she had a *whole pound*. Imagine. A *pound* of perfume. That's a *lot!* What does Mary do with it? She gets down on her knees in front of Jesus as he is reclining at the dinner table, she stretches out her hands towards his feet, she pours a *pound* of this expensive perfume on his feet, and she uses her own hair to gently rub it all over them, deep into the pores in his skin. John says "The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume." Of course the house would have been filled with the fragrance. That was a *lot* of perfume!

Try to imagine how *outlandish* this was, how *outrageous*. One of Jesus's disciples, Judas Iscariot, was utterly appalled. He wants to know why the perfume wasn't sold and the money given to the poor. He estimates that the perfume would have gone for three hundred denarii. A denarius was how much money a common laborer would have made in a day. Do the math; that's roughly \$24,000 at a bare minimum, or maybe something more like \$33,000 in today's economy. Thirty-three thousand dollars' worth of *perfume!* All used up, in the space of just a few minutes, on somebody's *feet* – which are just going to get dirty again when Jesus steps outside the house to take his next walk! Do you know what you could *do* with thirty-three thousand dollars? You could feed *hundreds* of hungry families for an entire *month!* Now, I think our natural tendency is to discount anything Judas Iscariot has to say – we know how *his* story turns out; he was the only one of Jesus's apostles never to be canonized as a saint; in addition to his betrayal of Jesus, he was also a thief; he would steal from the common purse that the disciples kept – but you have to admit: he had a *point*. Every month our Mission Committee gets *many* requests from various organizations that are all trying to help people, all of them asking for financial support. Imagine if we could give away \$33,000 to an organization dedicated to providing help to poor people. Imagine the *difference* that could make in people's lives. So Judas thinks Mary is just being *wasteful*. That perfume that she poured on Jesus' feet is now *gone*. It's never coming back. It's never going to make a *bit* of difference in anybody's life. Not for the people who really *need* it.

That's what Judas thinks. Or, at least, it's what he *says*. Is he right?

Jesus sees things differently. He says: "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Okay. We need to think about this. There's a lot here to unpack. Let's start at the end of what Jesus says, and work backwards. "You do not always have me." That is certainly true. Jesus knows what his disciples seem not to understand, even though he has explained it to them several times by now. *Jesus' days on earth are numbered*. He knew, even if his disciples did not, that his earthly life was coming to an end. *Soon*, in fact. Less than one week after this dinner party, Jesus would be *dead*.

"You always have the poor with you." It is certainly true that poverty existed then, and poverty exists today, and twenty centuries of Christian ministry and compassion haven't made it go away. Here in our country, some 37 million people live in poverty – more than 11% of the population, or one out of

every nine people. That is a *lot* of people. So even if we dedicated, say, \$33,000 to feeding poor people, it would only go so far. In the grand scheme of things, \$33,000 would barely make a dent. The reality is that if all we are doing is *feeding* people, that's not going to help them get out of poverty, and stay out. If we just provide handouts, that alone will not solve the fundamental problem of *why* there are so many people in poverty in the first place. There are some *deeper* issues that need to be addressed too.

But still: in a world where there is so much poverty, so many people in need, pouring \$33,000 worth of perfume on somebody's feet definitely seems like an extravagant and wasteful thing to do. But Jesus commends Mary's act anyway: "She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." I wonder if Mary had any idea that Jesus was about to die. I wonder if she sensed that his end was near.

What Mary did to Jesus was an act of *devotion*. An act grown out of her *absolute faith* in him, her *trust* in him, the *hope* she had found in him, the *love of God* that she experienced through him. She may or may not have realized it, but she was *anointing his body* for its impending burial. Among the Jews, anointing was typically reserved for people or objects who were considered *holy*, people or things that manifested the divine presence in some way. Priests were anointed. Sacred objects, like those that were used in the Temple in Jerusalem, were anointed. Sometimes prophets and kings were anointed. Common people typically were *not* anointed; indeed, anointing with oil seems to be one of the things that separated the common from the sacred. Mary's act of anointing Jesus with oil indicates that she viewed *him* as sacred, as holy. Jesus was called "the Messiah," in Greek, "the Christ," which means, "the Anointed One." The Anointed One of *God*. Mary was making Jesus *in fact* what he already was *in name*.

Within about a hundred and fifty years after the death and resurrection of Christ, the Christian Church had developed some practices associated with anointing. Ordinary Christians would often be anointed on the forehead or other parts of the body, as a seal of the covenant of baptism and of God's promises. To this day, the Orthodox and Catholic Churches, and some Anglican and Lutheran churches, continue to anoint new Christians in this way. Several branches of the Christian family also anoint people who are sick or dying. That practice developed because it's mentioned in the epistle of James.

Jesus was not a new Christian. He also wasn't sick and in need of healing. But he *was* about to die. The circumstances of how that would happen would mean that no one who cared about him would be available to minister to him after he was arrested. He was going to be entirely in the hands of his enemies. *They* certainly weren't going to anoint him. Not unless they did it mockingly.

Was it wasteful, Mary using all that perfumed nard to anoint Jesus? I suppose that depends on your perspective. If you want to give every ounce of available money to help people who need it, then yes, of course it was. But if you think that there's something special about Jesus, something precious, something utterly *unique*; if you believe that he is, in fact, the Son of God, the Messiah, our Savior and Lord; that he is the one who saves you from your sins and who will ultimately bring about the full restoration of this fallen creation; if you place all your hope and trust in him, the way Mary herself did ... well, then, perhaps you will see. It wasn't a waste. It was ... *sacred*. It was ... *holy*. It was an incredibly precious gift. Not a gift that *God* could give Jesus, nor a gift that Jesus could give himself. It was a gift that could only be given to him by someone who followed him, someone who was deeply devoted to him, someone who knew him for who he really was. It was an ultimate act of sacrifice and devotion.

May we love Jesus that much. May we be *that* dedicated to him, that willing to *honor* him.

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