

“Jesus, the Immediate One”

John 12:1-8

Sermon notes for the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL

5th Sunday of Lent, April 7, 2019

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***A prophet-woman broke a jar, by love's divine appointing.
With rare perfume she filled the room, presiding and anointing.^[1]***

She's the star. She has taken center stage. It is Mary—quiet Mary—who stops the dinner party in its tracks when she opens the bottle of costly perfume, slips to her knees, and begins anointing Jesus' feet with it.

They freeze. Her brother Lazarus stops talking. Her sister Martha stops serving. Judas the disciple who wants eagerly to get Jesus' revolt underway ASAP stops plotting. The rest of the disciples put down their glasses, lean forward, and look down. They look down and can't believe what they are looking down at.

Mary—quiet, unassuming Mary—is on her hands and knees. She's presiding over the whole room as she is washing Jesus's road-weary-sacred feet with perfume.

Didn't a servant wash his feet before dinner? Didn't a servant wash all their feet before sitting down for dinner? Why again? And why with perfume?

The sweet perfume has refreshed, quickened something in them. Its fragrance mingles with the meal and the candle smoke and the evening spring air.

Is she weeping? Is she smiling? Is she singing, quietly, humming while she works her perfumed ritual on holy feet? The disciples can't tell because she's bent over so far, so low. The scene is muffled. Her head, her face, her hair, all that long, long hair, is obscuring Jesus' feet. Her face is buried in her work, her shoulders, arms working, her hands kneading, smoothing the perfume onto their master's feet, his crusted heels, his dusty ankles.

Their hearts are pounding. In these long, strange moments before cognition, the disciples are confused, stunned, awed. What's going on here?

Washing feet is a custom with which the disciples are well-acquainted. It's necessary to wash feet. In some settings it's ceremonial. It's a servant's job, and Mary—well, she's a woman. Same thing?

But Mary is a woman. Jesus is a man. And this kind of intimacy, this kind of slavery . . . her long, long hair.

No one dares a word. Their breathing is hushed and heavy.

Anointing one's head is part of their tradition. The head of a king is anointed at coronation. Anointing with oil confers blessing and honor. The sick are anointed with oil. Human touch is healing.

Unmoving, they watch her, kneeling at his feet. Drying his feet with her long hair. She hovers so low, surrounding his legs, never allowing him to put his foot to the floor.

Unmoved, Judas is the first to speak. (Peter is the bold, blustery disciple. He's often the first to speak, to crack a joke, to burp after dinner, to protest, to argue, to agree. But Peter is quiet, looking now to Mary, looking now to Judas.)

Judas speaks.

Judas says, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"

Waste.

There. Judas said it. This is a waste.

Yes, it is—*sort of*. This perfume clearly isn't the cheap stuff. And, yes, it could have been taken to market and sold. And, surely, the proceeds could have been used to feed people, to help people. God knows plenty of people are withered under the hardship imposed by Rome.

Waste. That surely is one way to look at it. Jesus had talked before about being wise stewards, about investing, about giving to the poor, about showing love to the least of these, about not being encumbered by stuff, by wealth, by mammon.

Judas said it. And is he wrong?

Waste. Judas said, *This is waste.*

But, *is it?* Is this act—this strange, unexpected act of service, of devotion, of obedience, of worship, of love—is, this a *waste*?

It is often Peter who is the first to defend, but not on this night.

Jesus speaks up.

Jesus said, "*Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.*"

That's another thing about anointing. It's what you do for the dead. You anoint the body of the dead for burial.

Jesus said, "*Let her alone. She's anticipating and honoring the day of my burial.*"

And then Jesus adds this even more curious line: "*You always have the poor with you. You don't always have me.*"

The disciples are going to have to think about this. Jesus' words hang in the air. My Burial. The poor. Judas' words hang in the air. Waste. The poor.

The perfume still fills the air, still fills their heads. This whole night has been a strange, wondrous affair. The disciples are going to have to sort it out. This is a lot to sort out.

What *is* clear, what is very clear, is that their rabbi and friend Jesus is here with them; they are deeply glad about that.

This also is clear: And Mary, once again, has honored Jesus above all else; she has honored him in a way by which they would never have conceived. But they are glad about that, too.

* * *

We modern readers see what the disciples could not possibly see. John tells us this scene takes place six days before the Passover, which means Jesus' crucifixion is less than two weeks away. It won't be long before Mary and the other women will be trudging at dawn to a tomb to anoint Jesus' dead body with spices, as was the custom. What they will find in that graveyard will astound the world.

And, in retrospect, what happened on this night, six days before the Passover, in Lazarus' house, will make better sense: Honor Jesus above all else. His presence, his purpose, his love, him, him, even his perfumed, holy feet.

Thank God for Mary. Thank God for the way she teaches us to bow down, to pay attention, to honor, and to love.

*A prophet-woman broke a jar, the sneers of scorn defying/
With rare perfume she filled the room, preparing Christ for dying.^[2]*

Gospel John 12:1-8 ¹Six 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."

This is the Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.