

God Moves Us . . . to Empty Ourselves

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
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John 12:1-8

This scripture reading follows a major turning point in the gospel of John. Just before this passage, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. Many Jews who saw Jesus perform this amazing miracle believed in him. But when word about Jesus' miraculous "sign" got back to the Pharisees and the chief priests, they felt threatened by his power and popularity and plotted to kill Jesus, putting a warrant out for his arrest. Jesus, consequently, went underground for a while. He kept a low profile in the days and weeks leading up to the Passover Festival so as not to attract the attention of the authorities.

Now, six days before Passover, we find Jesus on the move again, walking the final leg of his journey to Jerusalem. He slips quietly into the village of Bethany (which means "house of the poor"), located about two miles east of Jerusalem. There, Jesus returns to the home of Lazarus and Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, for a dinner party. As you might imagine, they were extremely grateful to Jesus for calling Lazarus out of the tomb, for giving their dear brother new life. They could not thank Jesus enough. Giving a dinner for him was one small way of offering their thanks.

During the course of the evening, Mary does an extraordinary thing. She takes "a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard," anoints Jesus' feet, and wipes them with her hair, filling the house with the perfume's sweet fragrance. It was a tender, intimate moment.

The anointing is what would ordinarily have been done to Jesus' body *after* his death. But somehow Mary had a feeling that this might be her last opportunity to see Jesus before he died. So, why not anoint him now, while he was still alive? Mary was filled to

overflowing with love and gratitude, and her love and gratitude poured out in her tender care for Jesus.

Mary's anointing of Jesus anticipated his impending death. It had two additional meanings as well. First, when we speak of Jesus as the Christ or the Messiah, we are speaking of Jesus as "the anointed one." That's what the words "Christ" (from the Greek) and "Messiah" (from the Hebrew) mean. They both mean "the anointed one." Second, when someone became a king, they were anointed in a solemn ceremony of dedication setting them apart for leadership and authority. The very next scene in John's gospel is Jesus entering Jerusalem surrounded by a crowd shouting: "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the king of Israel." Mary's anointing of Jesus identifies him as both Christ and King.

Not only was Mary's anointing of Jesus a tender and intimate gesture, it was also an extremely costly gesture. Nard was a perfumed ointment imported from the Himalayan mountains. A Roman pound of it was the equivalent of about 12 ounces. And its monetary value, 300 denarii, was the equivalent of a year's wages for a day laborer. Mary spared no expense in offering Jesus her love and care.

But Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus' disciples, the one who would soon betray Jesus to the authorities, was also there at the dinner. And he objected to Mary's extravagant act: "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" Now, that question might have occurred to others at the dinner party. After all, we're talking about a year's wages! It was worth a lot of money! But if that question did come to others' minds, they had the sensitivity and good sense not to ask it. It was neither the time nor the place to question what Mary had done. It was her home, after all. And Jesus was her guest. What difference did it make to Judas?

Well, the writer of John's gospel tells us parenthetically, "([Judas] 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.)" So Judas' question was disingenuous. He wasn't concerned

about the poor. He was only concerned about himself. If the perfume had been sold, Judas stood to benefit from the proceeds.

Judas is shown to be the ultimate hypocrite. He accuses Mary of misusing resources, something he has already done in stealing from the common purse. I take from this that Judas was not only a thief and a hypocrite, but a bully as well. He could have kept his question to himself. He didn't have to blurt it out to everyone in the room. But he did just that, intentionally leveling criticism at Mary for her lavish generosity toward Jesus. The only purpose in asking such a question after the fact was to try and make Mary feel bad about what she'd done – that she had shown poor judgment, that she had wasted resources. Mary couldn't undo what she had done. She couldn't put the costly perfume back in the bottle, sell it, and give the money to the poor. So why bring up the question at all? Judas was trying to bully her.

How does Jesus respond? He faces him down. He calls him out. Jesus defends Mary and counters Judas' feigned concern for the poor. "Leave her alone," Jesus says. "Just stop it, Judas! You're being mean. No one asked you!" "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."

Now, Jesus' words here have often been taken out of context to say that poverty is inevitable, that it can never be ended, and that any attempts to do so are futile. The Adult Christian Education class this Lenten season has been exploring this issue in depth using Liz Theoharis' book entitled *Always with Us? What Jesus Really Said about the Poor*. She focuses on Matthew's version of this story, in which many details differ but the main story line remains.

What we are finding is that to interpret Jesus as saying in this one passage that poverty is inevitable and cannot be ended runs counter to all that Jesus said and did to lift up the poor over the course of his public ministry. Indeed, when Jesus says "you always have the poor with you" he is echoing a passage from Deuteronomy 15, which Theoharis calls "one of the most liberating 'Jubilee' passages in the

Old Testament.” It’s where God commands that every seventh year is to be a year of rest for the land and workers, a year when debts are forgiven and slaves are freed. It is a divinely mandated reset of the agrarian economy. “There need be no poor people among you,” Deuteronomy says, “for . . . [God] will richly bless you, if only you fully obey the Lord your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today.” If there are poor among us, it is because we have not been careful to follow God’s law. We have allowed wealth to accumulate in our society, while the basic human needs of millions of people are allowed to go unmet.

In context, Jesus is saying that there will be plenty of opportunities to care for the poor in the future, but there is not plenty of time to attend to him. Jesus’ days are numbered, and he knows it. There is a warrant out for his arrest, and the authorities want to kill him. Jesus has his eyes set on Jerusalem, where the confrontation with the authorities will soon come to a head.

Under the circumstances, Jesus is grateful for Mary’s tender loving care, but he has no patience for Judas’ hypocrisy. Indeed, in Matthew’s version of the story, Jesus says of the woman who anointed him, “She has done a beautiful thing to me. . . . Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.”

In these last days of Lent, this story foreshadows Jesus’ final days in Jerusalem. The Greek word used for “dinner” in this passage is used elsewhere in John only to refer to Jesus’ Last Supper with his disciples. The Greek verb used to describe Mary “wiping” Jesus’ feet with her hair is the same word used to describe Jesus “wiping” his disciples’ feet at the foot washing at the Last Supper.

This morning as we come to the table, we remember that Last Supper and Jesus’ commandment to his disciples: “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” May it be so. Amen.