

Sermon † April 3, 2022

John 12:1-8

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The anointing at Bethany is a dramatic story. The story gets better year by year—with inflation. According to the Bible, the perfume Mary dumped on Jesus' feet was worth three hundred denarii. In today's market, each coin would be worth around fifty dollars. So how much perfume did Mary pour out on a pair of dusty feet? Well, about fifteen thousand dollars.

Think of it! Fifteen thousand dollars spilled in a moment of intense emotion. If nothing else, you have to admit, hers was an extravagant gesture.

Nowadays, we read the story and we're embarrassed. Mary is too much for us; fifteen thousand dollars tossed away in an instant without even thinking. Our love is seldom so careless.

Even though we're in church on Sunday, to us religion is not all in all. It's merely a part of our lives, along with other interests: play and politics, the arts, good books, and a few hours every week in front of the TV.

What's that line from a contemporary movie? *"I believe in being religious, I just don't want to get carried away."*

That's the motive; we don't want to get carried away. We believe in Jesus Christ, but not always enough to talk about him out of church in public without a blush and a stammer. We seldom get carried away.

It's no wonder we find it hard to understand wild, irrepressible Mary. We are embarrassed. *What did Mary do—she gave herself away.* Fifteen thousand dollars isn't small change spilled over calloused feet, soaking away through the earthen floor, lost and gone forever.

There was nothing calculating about Mary. She might have thought it over and chosen lesser gift; after all, as we say, *"It's the thought that counts."*

I'm reminded of a New Yorker cartoon from a few December's ago . . . It showed a well-dressed man in a department store going over his Christmas list. *"Do you have something for a five-dollar relative?"* he says.

Well, there was no calculation in Mary; she didn't put price tags on people or dollars signs on deeds. She didn't sit down with a checkbook and ask how much she could afford to give; she simply gave—pouring out priceless perfume to honor her priceless Savior. Hers was an extravagant gesture!

*An extravagant waste!* That's what Judas thought. *"It should have been given to the poor,"* he said.

Some folks do have a way of killing joy, don't they? They will stamp out love in the name of propriety, morality, or sometimes even social action.

*"It should have been sold and the money given to the poor!"* snarled Judas.

By Judas' logic, what good is worship? What good is bread and wine in Holy Communion? There are hungry people in Somalia and Haiti who crave bread and drink.

Morally, Judas had all the logic on his side; his arithmetic was unassailable.

Judas was a moralist, a social action man who had lost faith in Jesus Christ. *"It should have been given to the poor,"* said Judas, dollar signs blinking in his eyes.

So, what did Jesus say? How did Jesus answer? *"Let her alone."* Jesus snapped, *"She has saved her perfume for my burial."*

We hear the words and simply do not understand. What on earth has Mary's gift got to do with Jesus' death? If there's a connection it clearly escapes us. Mary's gift and Jesus' death, what is the tie-in?

The one was a costly gift poured out in love, and the other . . . the other . . . Christ's death on the cross was the same thing. Both actions who way over the top. A costly outpouring of Godlove, extravagant, utterly selfless; Godlove poured out for all us poor, broken sinners.

Years ago, James Denny, a British cleric, climbed up into a pulpit lugging a life-sized eight-foot-tall cross. He stood it up and pointed to it, shouting,

*"All this he has done for us! Can we hold back? Can we hold back? Love so amazing so divine demands my soul, my life, my all."*

*"She has saved her perfume for my burial,"* said Jesus. Love for love, gift for gift, outpouring for outpouring, she gave.

So . . . here's the question: What are we saving ourselves for? *"The poor,"* said Jesus quoting the Hebrew scriptures, *"the poor you will always have with you."*

Jesus was not laying down a logic of benign neglect: since you will always have the poor hanging around, you can safely ignore them. No, *"You will not always have me with you,"* says Jesus, *"but you will always have the poor"* . . . to serve!

Christ is no longer with us in flesh—*"He is not here; he is risen,"* sang the angel at his tomb—but his special friends—the poor, the hassled, the hurt, the homeless, the victims, they are with us, and we can pour out ourselves in love for them.

Faith that forgets the poor isn't faith at all; it's merely a private little religious perversion.

The Dutch Reformer, John Calvin, gave his followers advice on planning their budgets: *"You give one-fourth of your money to the poor, one-fourth to the education of the clergy, and another fourth to the mission of the church, and with the last fourth what do you do? Why you give that to the poor as well."*

The poor we have with us and, lately, while the rich have been getting richer the poor have multiplied. How do we celebrate the sacrificial love of God? Why, we give ourselves away—extravagantly!

The story of the anointing at Bethany is a strange, strange story: fifteen thousand dollars poured out in love. The story is shocking.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if the church was both as careless and as loving?

Then, perhaps, the shocked world would say, *"See those crazy Christians. Look, how they give themselves away!"*