

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 04/06/2025



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Revised Common Lectionary Year C

Sunday, April 6th

John 12:1-8

Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Contrasting images of discipleship

The Gospel lection for the Fifth Sunday in Lent this year is John's narrative of Mary of Bethany anointing Jesus. John's Gospel is rich in symbolism and contrasts. These eight verses are no exception. While there is much packed into this short text, two very different images of discipleship emerge.

John 12:1-8 Commentary

The text follows the raising of Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1-44) and occurs the evening before the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the beginning of Holy Week (John 12:12f). Not surprisingly, after the raising of Lazarus more and more people began to follow Jesus. The chief priests and Pharisees were concerned that if Jesus was permitted to continue, the ever-increasing numbers of followers would provoke a response from the Romans. Such a response would threaten their positions and perhaps even the continued existence of the nation. As a result, the chief priests and Pharisees planned to put Jesus to death (John 11:45-53). Since Jesus could no longer walk about openly, there is an interim period where Jesus and His disciples withdrew to the region near the wilderness and stayed in a town called Ephraim (John 11: 54). As the Passover approaches the people wonder if Jesus will come to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast (John 11:55-57).

¹ Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ² So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table.

For such an important feast as Passover, finding lodging in Jerusalem would have been difficult. Many pilgrims would stay in Bethany which is approximately 2 miles from Jerusalem. For Jesus, Bethany makes perfect sense since He already has followers there. Six days before the Passover places these events on a Saturday after the Sabbath. The fact that they were reclining at table suggests this is more of a formal banquet than a simple meal. At such events guests would lie with their heads near a low table propped up by their elbows, using their other hand to eat. Their feet would point away from the table. This posture is important to bear in mind for what happens later in the narrative. The word rendered as meal (*deipnon*) refers to the main meal, usually the evening meal. In John's Gospel the word is used two more times, each time referencing the Last Supper (John 13:2; 21:20). This meal can also be considered sacramental since it prepares Jesus for His burial (v.7).

Martha, the sister of Mary (John 11:1) and sister of Lazarus (John 11:2), is indicated as the one doing the serving (*diakonei* - the word from which we derive "deacon"). Martha's work in this narrative is characterized favorably. In

Luke's Gospel, Martha is distracted and complains to Jesus that her sister Mary has left her alone to do the work while Mary sits at Jesus' feet and listens to Him teach (Luke 10:38-42). The fact that Lazarus was also at the table eating suggests he was still physically alive and well after being recently resurrected from the dead.

³ Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

The focus of this text is Mary's response to Jesus for restoring her brother's life. The weight of the ointment was a Roman pound (*litran*) which was about 11.5 ounces - still a large amount of ointment. Spikenard (also called nard, nardin, and muskroot) is a class of aromatic essential oil, derived from *Nardostachys jatamansi*, a flowering plant of the valerian family which grows in the Himalayas of Nepal, China, and India. Nard was imported from Northern India (hence the expense) and used by the Romans for anointing the head. Matthew (26:7) and Mark (14:3) also tell of this anointing but differ to John in that Mary's name is not mentioned and the woman anoints Jesus' head rather than his feet.

Jesus' feet would have been exposed as He reclined at the table. This is a very humble gesture since caring for another's feet was a task for servants. Jewish women would typically only have their hair unbound in private in the presence of their husband. This act of devotion is both shocking and extravagant as it is intensely personal. This act is also a prefigure of Jesus washing His disciples' feet (John 13:1-20) and a prefigure of the anointing of Christ's body by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, who use one hundred *litras* of myrrh and aloes (19:38-40) - an anointing fit for a king.

⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" ⁶ He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it. ⁷ Jesus said, "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸ For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me."

John makes sure to inform his readers that Judas is a thief. This is the only reference to the character of Judas before his betrayal of Christ. John also points out how Judas' claim to care for the poor was really self-serving. Interestingly, Matthew (26:14) and Mark (14:10) both portray Judas betraying Jesus to the chief priests immediately following the extravagant use of the perfume and Jesus' defense of it.

A denarius was a day's wage for a laborer and thus the ointment was worth at least \$20,000 in today's money. It was not just Judas who objected to this extravagance. In the Matthew parallel (26:8) it was the disciples who objected to the waste. In the Markan parallel (14:4) some of the disciples were indignant to the waste. What would we think of a church today that spends \$20,000 on a new chalice for the wine to celebrate the Lord's Supper? In verses 7 and 8, Jesus puts the matter into context. While Mary had no way of knowing, she was preparing Jesus for his burial. Jesus makes this excuse for her. Against the cost of a regular funeral these days, the cost of the ointment now seems more reasonable.

Reflection and Application

There is much irony in this passage. It is Judas who speaks with prophetic concern for the poor, the outcast, and the vulnerable. It is Mary who is the one who is frivolous with resources. Yet it is Mary who appears to be the true prophetess in this story since she knows the urgency of the moment. Jesus defends the actions of Mary by referring to His own upcoming burial. Jesus' remarks about always having the poor present are not meant to be used to justify inaction, Jesus is simply emphasizing His imminent departure.

Beneath this rich narrative there appears to be two very different images of discipleship. One is a model of devotion that is intensely personal, bordering on the shocking. It is prodigal in nature, free from legalistic taboos and involves a faith that leads to bold action. This is the nature of discipleship demonstrated by Mary of Bethany. She is all-in. The other image of discipleship is demonstrated in this narrative by Judas. When the synoptic parallels are also considered, we see a similar understanding from Jesus' other eleven disciples. Their idea of discipleship is more practical, more worldly, and perhaps has a hint of self-righteousness. In the case of Judas, it was also self-serving. Of the two images of discipleship presented in this text, Jesus is clear on which one He endorses. Of course, a lot is about to happen to these men over the next two months and eleven of them will make the transition to a different level of discipleship. As another caution, this passage must be understood in the context of Jesus' imminent departure.

During this Lenten journey, John causes us to reflect on our own walk as disciples. Which of the two images revealed in the text best reflects the ideas we have about church and discipleship? How effectively do we balance worship and action?



For feedback or to be added or removed from the mailing list, please e-mail lectionary@fieldpreacher.org