

Sermon - Mary and Judas (John 12:1-8)

Sunday April 6 2025

Gifts are complicated. They're beautiful, they're wonderful, but they do stir things up. An inheritance comes to a family, or a big donation is given to a church, and arguments begin immediately, as to what should be done with the money. If a person receives a big gift, the people around that person start feeling bad – I wish I could receive a gift like that. How do I rate, next to the person who got this great gift? And if you are the recipient of an extraordinary gift, you may feel self-conscious – it's too generous, could the giver really afford it? And do you deserve to receive such a gift, if you've never been so generous? So you start protesting – Please, you don't have to do this... Gifts are complicated.

In our scripture, Jesus is at dinner with friends, when one of his disciples, named Mary, begins anointing his feet with nard, a kind of perfumed ointment that was extremely expensive. The text says it was worth 300 denarii. A denarius was a day's wage for laborers back then, so 300 denarii would have been a normal person's income for an entire year. That's lavish. You might wonder how Mary even had that much money. Was she extremely wealthy? It's possible. It's also possible that she spent her life savings on this gift for Jesus.

We try to imagine why Mary gave this extraordinary gift, and on the one hand, it's not difficult to understand. This story takes place at the home of Mary, her sister Martha (who is serving dinner), and their brother Lazarus. Not long before this story, Lazarus had been ill, and had died. Jesus travelled to his tomb, and raised Lazarus from the dead. And now, here they are, having dinner.

Could you imagine wanting to do something extraordinary, to give something grandiose, to communicate your love and gratitude for someone who had done something so important for you, and for your family? On the one hand, this makes a lot of sense.

But on the other hand, we should recognize that it doesn't need to make sense. People judge other people's choices, what they do with their money, and what kind of gifts they choose to give. The question is always insinuated, is a gift appropriate? Is it justified? Is it okay for someone to give this gift?

But this story is telling us that we are not entitled to decide whether Mary should do what she has chosen to do. It's her choice, she has her reasons. Maybe we would approve if we knew her reasons, maybe we would not. But that decision is not ours to make.

Judas says the things we're at least thinking. 300 denarii, a year's income – that money would be better spent on something else, other than smelly ointment for Jesus' feet. He's gonna have fragrant piggies, and then... what? And now all that money is gone.

It's her money, or perhaps it is Martha's and Lazarus' and Mary's money together, she has done with this money what she or they have chosen, and onlookers have opinions. You and I have opinions about what other people do with their money.

Mary spent an enormous amount of money on this ointment, so she could give it to Jesus. It's what she chose to do. The gospel of John actually includes several stories that feature what you might call over-the-top generosity. Jesus and the disciples feed a crowd of 5,000 people with a few fish and loaves of bread – there were 12 baskets of leftovers. There's a resurrection story in which the disciples have gone fishing but caught nothing. Jesus appears and tells them to lower their nets one more time, and they pull up 153 fish. That's more than they needed for breakfast. Have you ever heard of Jesus turning water into wine? The story is in the gospel of John, and in the story, Jesus gives this party about 180 gallons of wine. Is that excessive? It was abundantly generous, for sure.

When Mary gives an extravagant gift, in her way she is acting like Jesus. Jesus gives, boldly, extravagantly, decisively. And just like Judas raised the objection to Mary giving the ointment, people objected to Jesus doing what he had decided to do. Jesus gave his life in the end, and his disciples tried to dissuade him from doing what he needed to do.

In the story of the ointment, Judas and Mary are really treated as countervailing examples. The text emphasizes the contrast between them. She is generous, and he is said to be a thief, looking to take for himself. When Judas says the ointment should be sold for money they could give to the poor, it's because he kept the purse, and wanted to skim some off the top.

This opposite equivalence continues. Mary anoints Jesus with ointment because she understands and believes what he's been saying about his trial and death. Judas and the other disciples have been in denial about all that. Judas speaks his objection to Mary's generosity, but does nothing to indicate his commitment the cause of Jesus. Mary says nothing; all she does is act.

In this story, Mary provides an example of the truly faithful disciple; Judas shows what a fickle and corrupted disciple looks like. We must remember though, that they are both disciples of Jesus. We should never say, Mary is a real disciple, and Judas was a fake, an interloper! No, they're both disciples, and they both exist in each of us. We all have both generosity and greed inside of us, of course we do. We have both

devotion and corruption, both truth and deceit, and we are always being called upon to decide which kind of disciple we're going to be, in this moment and the next.

But before we're done with this story, let's do consider the point that Judas made. Because even if he was trying to pull some shady dealings, and he didn't really care about the poor, the thing that he said is actually true. The money spent on the expensive gift of ointment really could have been given to the poor, and it would have helped people. Judas himself may have had cynical reasons for saying that, but it's still true.

We need to take this point seriously, because it applies to anything that we might spend money on, beyond the food and shelter we need to live. If you buy a new t.v. you could have given that money to buy blankets for the homeless, or food and medicine for refugees. It's true. And if you spend time, doing anything just for enjoyment, like acting in the theater, or learning to play the violin, or even just watching the sunset, well you could have spent all that time, volunteering at the food pantry or something. This is true.

When Judas says the ointment could have been sold for money to give to the poor, he's right. We shouldn't dance around it; it's true. So we need to listen closely to Jesus' response. He doesn't dispute Judas' point, but he says, Mary bought this ointment to save it for my burial. You will always have the poor with you. You will not always have me.

I have heard people interpret those words, "The poor will always be with you." to mean that Christians don't need to worry about helping the poor. That's a terrible interpretation that is antithetical to Jesus' broad moral teaching, and also technically incorrect. When Jesus says, 'the poor will always be with you, he's actually quoting scripture. He's referring to the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 15, which reads: "Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. Since the poor will always be with you on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land.'

Jesus affirms the fact that God expects God's people to help the poor. It's who we are, it's what we must do. And generosity to the poor is not something we do one time, with a big showy demonstration. No, we must always care, and help and give. All the time.

And. There are other things that we do in our lives, as well. Things that are meaningful and beautiful and good and right, in their own way. If you spend time painting or sailing or hiking or whatever you love to do, you're not committing a moral transgression, just because you're doing something that enriches your personal life.

And if you choose to give someone you love a generous and costly gift, because you care about them, and you want to, it's ok.

Because we also know as Christians, that Jesus is not going to just validate our comfort zones. He is constantly pushing us, challenging us, to see our neighbor in the stranger, to summon compassion and forgiveness in a bitter and hostile world, and to give of ourselves in ways that are difficult. Mary was a follower of Jesus, we know she was dedicated to serving the poor, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, because that's the Jesus movement was all about. But in this moment, she chose to do something that was less about the movement as a whole and more about the personal love for Jesus that she wanted to express. Sometimes you're focused on making the world a better place, and sometimes you're just trying to do something beautiful and kind for someone that you know. The two are not mutually exclusive.

How do you know where the line is supposed to be, and which kind of giving is most right on this day or the next? I don't have a great answer for that, but maybe pray about. There's a lot of people in the world praying that God will destroy their enemies. If you pray, God what is the best form of kindness for me to practice today? My guess is, God will be glad to hear from you.

Amen.