

May The Source of our Actions be Gratitude

Psalm 126

Isaiah 43:16-21

Philippians 3:4b-14

John 12:1-8 (from Vanderbilt Divinity Library)

12:1 Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.

12:2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.

12:3 Mary 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.

12:4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said,

12:5 "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"

12:6 (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.)

12:7 Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.

12:8 You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

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This sermon is based on this section of scripture about Jesus and Mary and Martha and oil and Judas Iscariot and money and the poor . . . but I don't believe we can look at this text without going one chapter previous to the resurrection of Lazarus, and looking a bit more closely at this remarkable family.

Martha was the oldest sister, then came Mary, and the youngest of the siblings was Lazarus. Lazarus is short for Eleazar - meaning "God helps". In Chapter 11, verse three, the sisters sent word to Jesus, while he was a two day journey away, that Lazarus, "the one whom you love, is sick." Lazarus is the only person in the Bible who is specifically named as the one whom Jesus loved. This has led some scholars to suggest that he is the anonymous "Beloved Disciple" from the Last Supper reference and the reference to one who was the first of the men to run to the empty grave. Some scholars have even hypothesized that it was the resurrected Lazarus who was responsible for some of this Gospel.

Martha we know as a good intended follower of and believer in Jesus. She is seen as a pragmatic woman, and possibly less emotionally involved in Christ's ministry than her younger sister. She is portrayed as an essential part of the early experience - she is part of the early movement of followers and her role should never be diminished. When Jesus returned, four days after Lazarus' death, she knew that Jesus had the power to have saved her beloved brother's life and said, "Even now, I am sure that whatever you ask of God, God will give you." And long before even Peter says that Jesus is the Christ, Martha says in verse 27, "I have come to believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, he who is to come into the world."

Mary, the middle child, was portrayed as being more emotionally involved in Jesus' ministry. She became so engrossed in Jesus' teachings that she forgot who she was as a female and servant of the men, and just sat there listening while Martha did all the work. When she heard that Jesus had arrived, she jumped up and ran to him, fell at his feet, weeping, causing Jesus to "shudder with the deepest emotions." And here is where we hear the famous shortest verse in the Bible, "Jesus wept". And she is the one who goes into history as the one who prophetically anointed Jesus, preparing him for his burial.

So it is in *this* amazing household that we have today's scripture. Jesus is in the home of the only man who could possibly relate to him, being the first to have been raised from the dead. It is here that Jesus spends time shortly before the historical last Passover of Jesus' earthly ministry.

I can only imagine what the mood was that night. The home of these three siblings had just provided a dinner and comfort for Jesus and fellow supporters. It can't have been too much before, that this home was filled with mourners, and now there is a celebration. Martha served, Lazarus was sitting at the table, and Mary . . . Mary, filling some unique role had to do something. She felt so strongly for Jesus, that mundane housework didn't fill her need at that moment. Just sitting and listening and talking wouldn't either. She was brimming over with emotion, what could she do to show her gratitude - to try in some way to express what she was feeling inside?

She had this expensive oil, a very fine perfume of pure nard. We don't know how much of a financial sacrifice it was for the family, but we know it is of great value. And she gets the idea to pour it on Jesus' feet. Her brother - whom she most likely loved very deeply, had, at one point recently, died. He was also Mary & Martha's financial security. Through Jesus' efforts, her brother's dear life and her financial security had been returned to her - how does anyone place a value on that? She wants to share her feelings in some symbolic way, so she pours this expensive perfume on Jesus' feet - an act of anointing.

This scripture has the oil on the feet - not the head. The head would have been a more "normal" place for a fine gift to someone, but this gospel writer purposely has the oil on the feet - a place only a corpse would get such treatment - in order to emphasize that this was foretelling the death of Christ. And in doing so, she fills the house with the fragrance. She does this for Jesus, but the whole household benefits from the smell.

Not only does she show her gratitude and her generosity by pouring this oil on Jesus' feet and filling the whole house with the smell, but the intimacy of letting down her hair and wiping the oil on the feet with her own hair . . . what an open display of affection and trust!

Her feelings seem to always be obvious, to the point where Jesus was showing himself to be affected by her honesty when he wept. And *who* could not understand her actions after all that she had been through? Who could blame her? Well, it seems Judas did.

Judas is seen as the antithesis to Mary. Her motivations come from gratitude to Jesus for all he is and all he's done. She feels personally so connected to him. Judas comes across as being cold and distant, judgmental and greedy. He is portrayed as a thief. He is in Mary's home and he is belittling her in front of all the guests on this lovely evening.

If Mary acted out of gratitude, what were Judas' motivations? One motivation might be greed. But Jesus loved this man, so there had to be more. Does he seem somehow similar to another character from the bible we have recently talked about? I can't help but hear the jealous older brother from the Prodigal son story here. Judas is often portrayed as struggling to get attention. He wants to be very powerful and important. His desire is so great that he feels confident enough to go to the most powerful Jews in the land to make a deal which brings about Jesus' death.

Judas' seems to know exactly what to say to make his personal motivations sound noble - the money could have gone to the poor! Isn't he a compassionate man - caring so much for the poor! But compassion is best seen in the actions of a human being, and Judas did not live compassion. The contrast is clear to those witnessing this encounter between Mary and Judas that he was not acting out of compassion.

Jesus comes to Mary's rescue and says, "Leave her alone . . . you always have the poor with you . . ." which is often times used as an excuse, by some, to diminish the urgency of those souls who are suffering from financial poverty. But that isn't really what Jesus is talking about, and I believe that in some way, deep inside, Judas knows this. For Judas was displaying an extreme poverty of *compassion*. It is the spiritually poor who cause the greatest damage in this world, and no amount of money could ever change that.

Yesterday at the CWF Spring Retreat, Pat Rizer gave a wonderful program focusing on how we sense God's 'nudging' in our lives. And one of the many precious insights was the difference between being a Christian and knowing Christ. Mary knew Christ. And because she knew Christ, she acted out of her *gratitude* in a purely open and honest way, not pretending not manipulating - she allowed herself to react to God's nudging and therefore became an instrument of God's will.

Judas was a follower of this Christian movement for his own personal benefit, and was trying to force those around him to change their focus according to his desires.

And you know what the amazing thing is about this contrast of personalities and motivations? God uses them both for good. Mary prepares and comforts Jesus, she is the first to be told about the resurrection – she is a vital part of the story. And Judas' actions, painful and self absorbed and destructive they may be, they were also vital to the story.

God overcomes all our human weaknesses. We make more progress towards God's will on earth when we let the source of our actions be based on gratitude for all that we know God has done for us - when we focus on our source of compassion and kindness. But even those times when we can't help but be less compassionate and understanding than we would want to be – when we think only of ourselves and float along expecting the world to do our will rather than acting for ourselves – even then, God will take the story and bring it back around to salvation – to resurrection!

So let us strive, in this pre-Easter, Lenten season, to focus on knowing Christ and allowing our gratitude for his companionship and love to be the source of our actions. AMEN