

“The Anointing”

John 12:1-11

On the last Monday night in January, just before the temperatures dropped prompting school closings that Wednesday and Thursday, our Monday night Bible study group was studying our gospel text for today from John. The topic was Mary anointing Jesus’ feet with costly perfume.

One of the discussion questions was this: “Describe the most meaningful gift you’ve ever been given. How did the gift make you feel?”

Libby Chilia as usual, was quick to answer. “When Tony gave me an electric blanket for our bed. It keeps me toasty warm. I turned it on before we left so it’s nice and warm when I crawl under my covers tonight.”

To which Tony replied, “That’s the most meaningful gift I’ve ever given you? Who would have figured?” with a smile on his face.

Pat Murray then told us the most meaningful gift she’s ever been given was when she and Ed were engaged, he gave her a ring pop. Almost everyone laughed but me and a few others who had no idea what a ring pop was. My wife, Danette, yet again shaking her head in disgust at my ignorance, explained to us what it was. I just didn’t know they were called “ring pops”.

A second opening discussion question was, “What is your all-time favorite scent? What memories does it bring to mind?”

People were describing the scents of their favorite flowers, perfumes, foods, and spices. I was the only one who said my favorite scent was the sweet smell of fresh cut alfalfa hay and the

memories of baling hay with my grandma driving the tractor and me and grandpa loading the bales on the wagon behind the baler. It was while loading alfalfa bales that grandpa suggested that I might be a pastor someday.

An electric blanket, a ring pop, the smell of alfalfa, a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard that filled the house with the fragrance of the perfume.

My Dictionary of the Bible says that nard is “a costly fragrant ointment prepared from the roots and hairy stems of an aromatic Indian herb. In the O.T. it appears in the Song of Solomon as a perfume giving fragrance to the king’s couch and as one of the several fragrant spices listed symbolically in praise of the bride. The expression translated “pure nard” in all four gospels designates the costly ointment which the woman used to anoint Jesus when he visited Bethany.”

The writer of our fall and winter Bible Study on Genesis and John, Margaret Feinberg, tells us that a full pound of nard would have cost a year’s wages at minimum wage in the first century. We don’t know for sure how Mary could have afforded it. It has been suggested that because Mary and Martha were single, because this house was large enough for Jesus and his disciples to spend the night during their trips to and from Jerusalem, and because nard was also used in the prostitution trade; that could explain how Mary could afford a pound of costly perfume.

Add to that the fact that Mary let down her hair and wiped his feet with her hair which would normally only be done by a prostitute that was single. A married woman was only allowed to let her hair down when she was alone with her husband.

Although it’s interesting, it really doesn’t matter what Mary and Martha did for a living or to wonder where all their money came from.

What matters is that they believe. On Jesus' previous trip to Bethany after Mary and Martha's brother Lazarus had died, Martha greeted him as he was approaching the town.

In John 11:27, "She said to him 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'"

Mary and Martha believe this is the last time Jesus will be with them in their home and this will be their last supper with Jesus. Martha is preparing the food yet again. As they will do on the coming Thursday night in Jerusalem, Jesus and his disciples are gathered around the low table, laying on their sides, propping themselves up on their left elbow, preparing to eat with their right hand with their legs and feet angled back from the table.

Before the meal, Mary anoints Jesus' feet. Margaret Feinberg writes, "This is a breathtaking portrait of a woman who has been captivated by Jesus and cannot contain it any longer".

Mary does this out of love, not out of duty. She knows this scent will follow him into Jerusalem from Palm Sunday to Good Friday. She will return with more on Easter morning, only to find an empty tomb. Mary anoints Jesus' feet as her last gift of love.

"The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume."

One of Jesus' disciples doesn't like it at all and Mary is met with contempt for her extravagance.

John 12:4-6 . . . ⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the

poor? 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.)

There are better ways to spend your money! Mary is scolded, questioned and criticized.

Margaret Feinberg writes, “As we live lives marked by extravagant acts of love, generosity, and worship, we should not be surprised by the critics. If anything, Mary’s story teaches us we should expect them.”

Why do you spend so much time volunteering at the church? Why bother tutoring kids at Parma Park? Why sew quilts or yarn hats and gloves that you’re just going to give away? Why go to a poor neighborhood to help serve a meal? Why do you worship every weekend? Why do you take the time and effort to bring your kids to Sunday School and confirmation? Or when the inactive husband challenges his wife with, “Why do you give so much money to the church?” Why do you spend so much time practicing with the choir or band?

Expect to be criticized for extravagant acts of love, generosity, and worship. And sometimes we’re the ones who are guilty of criticizing and judging.

Why do young families drop their kids off for Sunday School and not come to worship? Who picks out the music? Why didn’t the pastor greet me as he walked past me in the narthex? I didn’t know half the people here on Easter morning.

We will be criticized and we will criticize as it has always been.

Paul Metzger writes: “Like Judas, we may ridicule Mary for her act of extravagance, which costs her a great deal – not only in terms of losing her savings but also in terms of losing face. How impractical! How outlandish and wasteful! But at times authentic worship will appear as

impractical, as outlandish, and as wasteful as it does here – just like God’s grace, which is poured out lavishly on unworthy sinners like Mary, you, and me.”

Jesus pours out his grace on Mary.

John 12:7-8 . . . ⁷Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Mary anointed Jesus’ feet as an act of worship. Jesus responds by supporting her and her act of worship. Jesus responds with grace.

Jesus responds by leaving the safety and comfort, and good food of Mary and Martha’s house to make his two mile journey into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Jesus responds by entering the temple in Jerusalem and over-turning the tables of the moneychangers. Jesus responds by gathering together his closest friends on Thursday night to wash their feet and share with them his last supper. Jesus responds with prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus responds with his seven last words as he suffers and dies on the cross. Jesus responds with grace when he forgives those who crucify him for they know not what they do and invites the criminal next to him to be with him in paradise.

Jesus responds by walking out of the tomb and greeting Mary.

Jesus responds with grace when we criticize others. Jesus responds with grace when we are criticized. Jesus gives thanks every time our lives are marked by extravagant acts of love, generosity, and worship.

What is the most meaningful gift you've ever been given? How did the gift make you feel?

The gift of God's grace and forgiveness through our faith in our crucified and resurrected Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

May the peace of God . . .

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