

Fifth Sunday in Lent

April 7, 2019

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Philippians 3:4b-14

John 12:1-8

Mary or Judas?

Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. ... But Judas Iscariot ... said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" – John 12:3, 5



In this contemporary painting by Daniel F. Gerhardt, Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus and Martha is shown kneeling at the feet of Jesus. She has a jar of precious ointment, ordinarily used only for funerals of loved ones. The burning candle not only provides light for her task; it also symbolizes the light Jesus brought into the world, a light she now bears in her ministry.

A reading from the gospel of John.

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.

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.

But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (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.)

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

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together:

Extravagant God, your generosity astounds us. You turned the other cheek, went the second mile, turned water into the best wine. You bring healing with every touch. You welcomed Mary's prodigal love. You hear our prayers today. Accept the offering of our hearts. And help us to hear your precious word. Amen

Subpart C of 5 CFG part 2635 United States Office of Government Ethics governs gifts between US government employees in the Executive Branch. For example:

- An employee may not give (or contribute toward) a gift for the employee's official superior.
- An employee may not accept a gift from another employee who receives less U.S. Government pay, unless the employee is not the employee's subordinate, and a personal relationship justifies the gift.ⁱ

An employee *may* give his or her superior a gift, but only so long as the gift does not have a cash value of more than \$10.

Gifts received from outside the office are even more complicated.

I can imagine that holidays and birthdays are tough to navigate for you all who serve in the Executive Branch or in other government offices.

The logic of these rules, of course, is sound. Expensive gifts could be considered undue influence or even bribery. It is an ethics concern and an important one.

But suspicion of expensive gifts did not begin in government offices. Most of us carry around a certain wariness when it comes to lavish giving. Maybe you could call it a cynicism. Whether we distrust the impulse behind the gift, or feel shame at the meager cost of our own gifts – when we encounter lavish generosity it *can* make us feel uncomfortable.

At least Judas did. I can image him rolling his eyes and muttering to Andrew under his breath, “Couldn’t she at least have used a towel? Did she have to use her hair like that? And wasting a whole jar of expensive perfume! That’s worth a year’s pay.” Was it?

Maybe Judas was exaggerating. Mary’s gift was gutsy; it was brave. The impact of her generosity, and the reason we remember her today – is in her audacity. Mary threw caution to the wind; she risked her reputation, and her financial security. She spent a whole lot of money, maybe all she had, on this lavish act of love.

She gave it all to the Lord she loved. Why do you think she did that? I have some ideas but first, let me tell you about my friend, Shannon Kershner who pastors a church in Chicago.

Fourth Presbyterian isn’t just in Chicago; it’s right on Michigan Ave, the Miracle Mile, Chicago’s premier commercial district. Shannon was crossing the street one day when she heard a voice shouting, “Pastor, Hey, Pastor! Wait!”

She turned toward the voice and immediately recognized a woman who spends a lot of time on Michigan Avenue holding an empty Starbucks cup, unobtrusively, but persistently asking for spare change. Shannon walks by her nearly every day, but she had never called out before, never really asked for anything. She’s simply there. This woman. In all kinds of weather, she’s there. So they know each other, at least by sight.

When Shannon turned to look at her, the woman ran out into the street and thrust a huge bouquet of flowers into her hands. They were still in the store plastic. Immediately Shannon realized

that this woman had just bought the flowers, bought them with the money from her Starbucks cup.

Before she could say anything the giver started in with the instructions.

“Now take these flowers for me and put them in the church. And pray for me when you do it. Okay? It’s my gift, my offering to God. Do you think God will like my offering? Do you think so?”

Her face was a complicated mix of emotions, and Shannon wanted to ask, “Why?” and, “Shouldn’t you have saved that money for food?” but she managed to put her judgmental thoughts away and said, “Of course. I’ll make sure to put them in the sanctuary. You can come by later and see them there.”

“And will you keep praying for me?” She asked, “That’s the other part.”

“Yes, yes, I will.”

And with that she turned and went back to her usual place, Starbucks cup empty again, waiting for the kindness of others.

Shannon wrote:

“The tops of my ears started to burn ... with embarrassment over my initial ... reaction, my cynical judgement about the right use of that money ... never imagining her motivation was to give God an offering, to say thank you for the way God continued to sustain her life. ... I immediately prayed for her, thanking God for her and asking God’s forgiveness for myself. ... [Her] act of unexpected and extravagant generosity made a holy difference. ... Her act of giving reminded me who and whose she is, as well as who and whose I am.”ⁱⁱ

Judas might have disagreed. As I studied the assigned passages for this week, one thing I noticed is that both are full of words indicating contrast: but, not, could, although; they are in here more than a dozen times. John wants us to see the difference between Mary and Judas and see their contrasting ways of approaching Jesus. He also contrasts Paul, the apostle, verses Paul in his former life, when he was constantly calculating and adding up the legal costs of everything. Paul compares his commitment to Jesus to the dedication of an Olympic athlete. He’s all in. He wrote:

I want to know Christ ...

That verb “to know” in Greek means more than to know intellectually. It means to know fully, intimately, deeply.

I want to know Christ and the power of the resurrection ... I do not consider that I have made it my own, but this one thing I do ... I press on toward the goal of the upward call of ... Christ.

Paul pressed on toward deep and engulfing knowledge of Christ and his resurrection. Mary already had.

This is how it happened. All this is recorded in the previous chapter in John, the day Jesus raised Mary and Martha's brother and Lazarus from the dead.

He'd been in the tomb four days when Jesus arrived. "Lazarus was so dead he stank," wrote Barbara Brown Taylor:

"So dead that Jesus stood in front of his tomb and wept. Then he roared so loud at death that he scared death away. While [Mary and Martha] tried to decide if they should run too, their brother came stumbling out of the tomb, trailing his shroud behind him like a cocoon." ⁱⁱⁱ

Other than that, nothing much happened that day. Jesus had, very simply, defeated death, the last enemy of all. It would be the same for Jesus, and because of him, for all the rest of us too. Raising Lazarus was the most astounding sign Jesus had ever done. It caused many people to believe in him, but it caused a lot more to fear him. Rome couldn't have someone going around doing that. Certainly the Jewish authorities couldn't. Because of Lazarus Jesus had a price on his head. He traded his own life for Lazarus', and ours. Mary knew that; she knew the time was short.

So she broke a jar and poured on Jesus the most expensive ointment any of them had ever seen. The fragrance of it filled the house.

That smell made Judas a little nauseous. The gift, Mary's posture, all of it made him uncomfortable. John's parenthetical comments about his thievery aside, he has a point about the extravagance of the gift. It *was* over the top, and it was also her anthem.

Do you see why she did it? She was pouring out her gratitude for the gift of her brother's life. Was that it? Or was she prophesying? Was she telling the future? Predicting his death? Jesus seems to receive her gift that way. Or was she simply generous, giving in a way she knew would make a holy difference to him. Was her giving an act of worship?

I think it was all those things.

Judas wasn't having it. He was one of those parsimonious Christians always asking, "How much did *that* cost?" Like a lot of people Judas called himself a follower of Jesus, but he was in it for himself, always looking to get something out of it. It's like the father whose teenage son complained,

"I don't want to go to church! I don't get anything out of it."
"Oh My Gosh!" said his dad, "I didn't realize that we go to church to worship YOU! Now, if we leave church and God says, 'I didn't get anything out of it, then we have a problem!'"

So who are you going to be? Mary or Judas? Most of us want to be Mary. We want to know the joy in generosity that the Bible speaks of so often. And we try, but there's a bit of cynicism, and some self interest in all of us.

Truth is, there's a bit of Mary and some of Judas in everyone. We are here because we want to know Jesus and his power, not just a little, but fully, deeply, intimately...like Mary. Giving to his church, his kingdom goals is the best way to know him. Nothing deepens our spiritual lives more than generosity. But, like Judas, talk of giving makes some of us uncomfortable. People feel coerced sometimes.

In the end it is always a choice. Who are you going to be? Mary or Judas?

Remember the old Cherokee wise man who was talking to his grandson?

“A fight is going on inside me,” he told the boy. “It is a terrible fight between two wolves. One is angry, afraid, guilty, envious, and proud.”

He continued,

“The other wolf is good – he is joy, peace, hope, truth and generosity. The same fight is going on inside you—and inside every other person, too.”

The grandson thought about it for a while and then asked his grandfather: “Which wolf wins?”

The old man smiled and replied, “The one you feed, son. The one you feed.”

ⁱ United States Office of Government Ethics,
<https://www.oge.gov/Web/oge.nsf/Resources/Gifts+Between+Employees>

ⁱⁱ Shannon J. Kershner, from a sermon “Give. Grow. Become!” preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago on November 1, 2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Prophet Mary” Day1 radio broadcast, first aired March 21, 2010