

“Mary's Work”

John 12:1-8

25 March, 2007 – the Fifth Sunday of Lent, Year C

the Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church

John 12:1-8

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.”

Prayer.

Allow me to give you a visual image, a setting for today's Gospel lesson. Imagine the color tan; an ancient city made completely of tan stones; a tan, ancient city named Jerusalem, sitting on the top of a tan mountain. No building rises higher than forty feet, but the elevation makes for two prominent structures to stick out: the Temple, which sits at the very top of the mountain, with two flanking staircases ascending to its entrance, and, an adjacent building, slightly taller than the Temple, called the Antonia Fortress. The Antonia Fortress was the temporary seat of Roman government during the season of Passover, and it served where Pilate garrisoned three or four divisions of Roman soldiers to maintain the peace. Surrounding this city on the hill, is a tan wall, standing 40 feet high and possibly 60 feet wide, with gated entrances for each point of the compass, where roads to distant locations would begin.

Outside the walls, the terrain fell away to valley's in each direction. To the east was the most prominent valley, called the Kidron valley. Running through it was the road to Jericho, snaking first through the expansive graveyard which covered the valley floor with stone colored ostuaries and monuments, then up the hill on the other side, called the Mount of Olives. On the far side of the Mount of Olives, covered with short, squat olive trees, is the village of Bethany, an un-walled group of stone and wood buildings, housing just a couple of hundred inhabitants. This is the location of our biblical narrative for this morning.

It is six days before the Passover; six days prior to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Because of Passover, the crowds would already be assembling. Faithful Jews from across the land would pack up family and household affairs and move to Jerusalem, so they could make their annual pilgrimage to the Temple, pay their annual tax, make their sacrificial offering, and participate in Passover celebrations, honoring their release from Egyptian captivity, being led to Palestine, and remaining chosen people of

1/5

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God's covenant.

The problem is, not everyone fit into the city. So spreading out across the land, completely filling all open areas between Jerusalem and Bethany and for miles around, would pop up large tent cities of thousands upon thousands of pilgrims. Through the crowds, shepherds would be herding sheep and other animals up to the Temple. The scene would have been of tents, crowds, commerce, and cattle ... an ancient bazaar of people and excitement.

The buzz had spread through the crowd like wildfire: Jesus of Nazareth was the messiah, he was God's chosen leader, and he was making his way to Jerusalem during this Passover. He was going to lead an uprising that would kick Pilate and his Roman soldiers out of the city, freeing the Jews from foreign occupation for the first time since King David, nearly a thousand years earlier. The environment was fully charged, and very dangerous. The Temple authorities were frightened that Jesus would upset their power and disrupt the flow of income, destabilizing the peace. Pilate had brought extra troops this year, and they were waiting for Jesus to come.

Jesus and his disciples stopped short of Jerusalem and visited in the home of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha; a village home in Bethany. Jesus had visited here often in his repeated trips to Jerusalem, to and from Galilee in the north. When Lazarus had become sick and died, his sisters, Mary and Martha, had sent for Jesus to come. When Jesus arrived, he grieved over his death, then, entered his tomb, and rose Lazarus from the dead. On other visits, Jesus had been served by Martha, even while Mary listened and leamed at the feet of Jesus.

Today, Lazarus was the one serving, breaking bread and sharing a cup with Jesus. Mary was certainly mindful of the expectation that was in the air. She was grateful for what Jesus had done for her brother, and for their family. She was caught in the emotion of the moment and spontaneously acted. Without concern for cost ... without concern for what other people thought or said ... without any other concern in the world, but only in an effort to bring Jesus some sort of comfort or peace, she anoints his feet with perfume. This is a symbolic act of Lordship and of her submission. It was an act of humility, touching his feet, wiping them clean with her hair. The mood was love and appreciation and apprehension.

Also at the table was an evil shadow, by the name of Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus' disciples and traveling companions. Judas had been holder of the common purse, and as John reports, was known to use it for his personal gain. John's perspective comes from hindsight, for he reports Judas' future betrayal and role in the Passion. The evil shadow is a critical one: why was this perfume wasted? wasted on Jesus? why wasn't it sold and the money used to benefit the poor?

But his criticisms are hallow. The purpose of perfume is to be used; its use doesn't constitute waste. Nothing is wasted upon Jesus that emphasizes his Lordship or our service. Waste? Waste would come from entrusting it to a known thief! That would be waist! Judas wasn't concerned with the poor. The poor are an afterthought. He wanted the proceeds to go to the common purse, which he held, and from which he stole.

2/5

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The Master defends his disciple; Jesus defends the actions of Mary. “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial,” he tells Judas. Two people understand the magnitude of Jesus' statement. One is Judas; Jesus, allowed himself to be killed, when all the world is ready to make him King? “If he has no intention for the throne,” Judas probably thought to himself, “then what are we doing here? Wouldn't it be better to turn him over as a traitor, and save all of our skins?” Hum. The careful listener can see the seeds being planted for his future actions.

The other person who recognized what Jesus had said was, thankfully, our Gospel author. He understood with just enough meaning such that, later on, after the resurrection and ascension, he could point back to that dinner table in Bethany, and report, yes, this is indeed, what Jesus knew was coming ... suffering and death, leading to resurrection and ascension.

Another dynamic taking place in this terse exchange of words was the fact that Jesus knew what Judas knew. No one else in the room knew. Jesus knew Judas was stealing from the common purse. And Judas knew that Jesus knew.

So Jesus stands him up in the presence of everyone else. He speaks the words of the Deuteronomist, words that everyone in the room would have known by heart. But he only speaks the first phrase, leaving their minds to complete the sentence. “You always have the poor with you,” and he pauses, leaving us to complete the passage, “... therefore, I command thee saying 'you shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy, and the poor.’” (Deuteronomy 15:11) “... but,” Jesus continues, “you do not always have me.” (John 12:8)

Today, we see two ways to approach Jesus.

The PREFERRED way is with gratitude, love, and desire to draw closer to him. One can follow the Martha example, who is cooking, serving and cleaning up ... doing something ... doing anything ... doing what she knows best, to communicate her love and support to Jesus.

I would call this the “casserole approach” of United Methodism. There is a sickness or death in the family, and the community responds by dropping by with a casserole. It is food, sustenance, easy to store and easy to reheat. Words fail. So actions replace the the inadequacy of words, and they speak to the deepness of love.

Others might call this the “cookie and punch approach,” where a reception is organized and implemented. The silver tea set is dusted off and the crystal punch bowl is brought out and put to use. People supply any abundance of finger sized treats, by the dozens. We don't know what else to say; so this is the only other way to let you know how much we love you.

Go Martha, go!

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The other PREFERRED approach is to follow Mary's example. Overwhelming love puts you at the feet of Jesus. From that position of humility and service one is drawn deeper in relationship with Him; growing spiritually through worship, prayers, devotions, meditation, and study. One is convicted to call on the sick, the shut-in, the lonely, the most vulnerable in society. One is driven to put faith into action, quietly and faithfully, not for what it can get us, but what we can do to serve Christ and His kingdom.

Yes, Mary, yes.

The other way to approach Jesus, as you have probably discerned, is the NOT PREFERRED WAY, which is defined by grudging criticism and sordid, self-serving motives. This is the way of Judas, who comes to Jesus with outward hostility.

This NOT PREFERRED WAY can come from both, within and from outside the Church. I would suggest through years of experience and observation, the most dangerous evil is that which comes from within, like Judas, hidden behind false pretenses.

Consider the critics in our world. Their goal is to tear down, to prevent progress, growth, or change. Critics desire to “go back to Egypt,” to return to the past, all in an effort to prevent from starting or growing a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Critics are free to be unimaginative and uncreative. They can leave the hard work of cooperation, collaboration, and consensus building up to others. It takes no effort to tear down what others have built.

Critics often have self-serving motives. It is all about building themselves up, puffing up stature, reputation, or power. “Look how important I am,” they can proclaim. With a simple voice of opposition, all the creative hard work can be tabled to committee and left to rot.

Critics are free to serve, but loathe commitment. Judas can serve as treasurer; just don't ask him to witness to the difference Jesus makes in his life. Likewise, critics don't mourn; they simply move on to the next subject ... a parasite in search of a host.

“Judas fan boys” don't have any passion, other than for destruction and that which serves their own purpose. These types of critics we might label as “hatch, match, and dispatch” disciples ... that is, folks who seek the Church for baptism, weddings, and funerals. It is all about “what can the Church do for me,” nothing about what I can do for Christ and his kingdom.

Two approaches to Jesus – a PREFERRED approach and a NOT PREFERRED way. Let our motives be clear. We are who we are because we love Jesus Christ. We are thankful for His gifts of grace to us: forgiveness of sins and salvation of our souls. Let us be clear: we desire the PREFERRED approach of Mary or Martha. We long to draw closer to Jesus every moment of each and every day.

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Whether you are more like Mary or more like Martha, bring their common denominator with you to the table of your faith: Love. Gratitude. Thanksgiving.

The Word of the Lord, as it has come unto me. Thanks be to God. Amen.