

The Fifth Sunday of Lent  
St. John 12:1-8  
April 7th, 2019  
St. George's Bolton  
Fr. Chris

## **The Crazyness of Giving and Receiving a Gift...**

“Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus’ feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.”

Jesus has been working very hard—overtime—to complete the ministry that He came to do. His feet are dusty and tired. His emotions are torn, not only over the death and resurrection of His friend Lazarus, the suffering of whose family brought him to tears, but also He knew of the betrayals and awful fate that he faced as He walked towards Jerusalem. He does not turn back, but keeps going.

And then He enters the house of his friend Lazarus, where Martha and Mary host a dinner for Him and for the disciples. There is great joy and thanksgiving in this tight circle around Him. This is the pinnacle of Jesus’ ministry. News of the rising of Lazarus from the dead precedes them as they move toward the Holy City. Yet, there is an ominous foreboding hanging around them also.

What a gift it was for Mary to take a whole pint of the costly nard and use it to anoint the tired, hurting feet of Jesus as he sat down to dine with His friends! With great humility, instead of a rag, she uses her long hair to wipe each of his feet with it. The fragrance was beyond wonderful, a treat for every olfactory nerve gathered in the home that evening. Imagine the most fragrant, highest quality candle you could buy and multiply the effects of burning that candle ten times. It was not only a great sensory pleasure for Jesus, but also for those who had gathered there. They could not have known that it would be used for his burial about 7 days after this mountaintop experience. But Jesus knew what it would be use for.

What a gift they gave to their friend, their rabbi, the one who had loved them so and poured out His heart for them. A small moment from some humble folk, yet a celebration of this very special Man now with them. But it was not so small for them, for these poor folk used whatever they could muster to give Jesus this gift of comfort and honor, this gift of true love and gratitude. He was not looking for or expecting any thanks and he was not doing all that he was doing looking for an

honor and gift like this. Financially, it was a huge thing for them to do, like it would be for us to give someone we cared about a car or a trip to Europe.

So the Server was trumped with loving service from his friends. Jesus came to serve, not to be served, he tells us in His own words. [Matthew 20:28] There were those among the gathered guests that evening who were uncomfortable with this special gift. Chief among these was the infamous Judas Iscariot.

I find it hard to sit back and let others do things for me. Very hard! I am used to doing things for others in every corner of my life. I feel uncomfortable to be waited upon. I look for ways to duck gifts and also to recompense the giver. I was uncomfortable last week while on vacation, when Lynn prepared me a wonderful breakfast one morning, and then as I arose to do the dishes after and clean up, she ordered me to sit down and told me to let someone else do something for me for a change. I did so, with a feeling of guilt lying heavy on my conscience. Were my feelings from a sense of unworthiness in my mind? Or dare I even pretend to embrace the teaching of my Lord, and feel as though I live to serve others and not be served myself?

I also remember my discomfort almost 40 years ago when I attended my first parish supper at my fledgling parish in Hartford, made up of mostly older people, when the West Indian ladies who could have been my grandmother in age and stature, sat me down at the head table and waited on me, bringing me my supper before anyone else, and pouring me my drink. I was also uncomfortable that day for the same reasons I just mentioned about last week. I had come to serve them, and here they were serving this 28 year old white man who was their untested young priest. As I had spent my life up to that point advocating for equal rights and opportunity for black people, I was especially uncomfortable being in the role of accepting their traditional and stereotypical role of serving white people. I hope I was able to turn the tables on them before I left that place, by showing them how much more they deserved the service, not me. But I also came to learn, that they were not serving me, the young pastor of their church, they were serving and honoring the symbol of ministry representing the Lord whom we all came to follow.

Sometimes we need to exercise those feelings of gratitude and accept gifts gratefully. It is more blessed to give than to receive. I find this to be so true each year I plan for Christmas and seek out gifts for others to bring moments of joy and love to their hearts, as God has so surely brought to mine. I enjoy it, and I have a lot of fun doing it.

The same is true, I suspect of the ministry of those among us who have volunteered at our bi-weekly visits from the Mobile Foodshare Truck. People are smiling and having a good time. 45 minutes of giving bringing so much blessing to each of us, much more than we are passing out to others. We never seem to have trouble getting volunteers to come for this ministry. Many make it to this moment who do not regularly make it into church. But the common denominator I hear from just about everybody? They had so much fun doing it! The gift of our presence, the gift of our service means so much to these neighbors who are our guests, and by extension, I believe this makes for a better, less humiliating experience for them also while they humbly come to seek food assistance so they can have enough to eat. Unexpected grace in giving service to others! ...Unexpected grace in being served by others who love you.

This is one of those times. Mary has anointed Jesus with costly nard, the same nard that will be used on his body at his burial a few days hence. It is kind of like a pre-paid funeral in a way.

Along comes Judas, and he objects to this gift, chastising everyone and pointing to the idea that this rich treat could be sold for a lot of money and it would go a long way toward feeding the poor.

I can sympathize with this observation. Surely God would want us to think of others, especially the poor first, ahead of ourselves. Didn't Jesus say himself, "Go sell what you have and give to the poor?" Mark 10:21: (in the story of the encounter with the young man of great wealth) "Jesus looking at him loved him, and said to him, "One thing you lack. Go, sell whatever you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and take up your cross and come, follow me."

This teaching then is not inconsistent with the observation of Judas Iscariot. I think the editorial comment inserted here is rather unfairly derogatory of Judas, because he was so hated by his counterparts for his betrayal of Jesus and by extension them, that it was easy to question his motives as in today's story.

Yet the response of Jesus is noteworthy: "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."

God knows when God is loved by us from our hearts. God will always accept this gift and celebrate it with us.

At the offertory in our worship service, we say the words, “All things come of thee, O Lord, and of thine own, have we given thee.” What is a little nard, collected from that which already belongs to God, to give God thanks for blessing us by coming among us? It is all His anyway!

If Jesus wanted, he could have made a chest full of gold and diamonds, our earthly treasure, to appear before him. We could feed the poor with that. But Jesus has endowed us with the means to carry forward the feeding of the poor in every generation. This is our work. This is our ministry. God has given us the means and resources to do so, as he has in many parishes around our diocese.

I am reminded of the Christmas Carol here, In the Bleak Mid-Winter: “What can I give Him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb. If I were a wise man, I would do my part. Yet what I can I give Him, Give my heart.” Go and give God your heart! AMEN