

“Mary’s Nard”  
The Reverend Michael L. Delk  
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
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John 12:1-8

The controversy had reached a critical stage. With the resurrection of Lazarus from the dead, Jesus’ power grew to a new level, and his opponents knew that left unchecked, more and more people would embrace Jesus as Messiah, which could lead to civil unrest and vicious reprisals by the Romans. It had happened before with others claiming to be the Messiah. So those most interested in preserving the status quo felt a sense of urgency and conspired to kill Jesus. In their minds, his death would keep the peace and save lives, though their animosity toward him probably made the decision easier.

Six days before this plot went active, Jesus dined with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus at their home in Bethany, not far from Jerusalem. During this meal, Mary took twelve ounces of nard, very costly, almost equal to a years’ pay, and anointed Jesus’ feet, wiping them with her hair. It was a radical, intimate, extravagant act.

Judas complained that the nard sold at market could have raised enough money to feed hundreds of people, just what you might expect from the disciple entrusted with keeping the common purse. Yet his claim concealed his true motive. Judas objected to Mary’s generosity because of his own greed. He wanted to steal the money, but now the opportunity was gone.

In reply, “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.’” Jesus defended Mary for pre-emptively preparing his body for burial, and makes clear that a much greater extravagance than nard would be poured out soon. His life, the most generous sacrifice

imaginable, would be given to save people from sin and death. Ironically, the priests and Pharisees had it right. Killing Jesus would save lives, just not in the way they expected.

However, we flinch when Jesus states with an almost callous realism that the poor would always be present, but not him. That seems selfish and out of character. Yes, events have proven Jesus right. Poverty has persisted for the last 2,000 years. Yet Jesus identified with the poor, the outcast, and here he seems to denigrate their plight. Hundreds of people needlessly went hungry, and for what? So that Mary could slather perfume on Jesus' feet and prepare his body for burial?

The tension here strikes us keenly. Look at the opulence of this place and its furnishings. Shortly, we will reenact the saving sacrifice of Jesus, drinking sacred wine from silver chalices that cost, at minimum, \$3,000 each. How do we reconcile the precious metals and fine fabrics with our mission to serve? How can we justify the extravagance to the homeless, the hungry, the poor? Of course, at the risk of sounding defensive or judgmental, we're not the only ones. Some churches pour their money into theatre-quality audio-visual equipment, fitness centers, and the like, but such comparisons cannot free us from the questions.

The answer lies in Mary, not what she did, but rather why, the motive. The text doesn't dwell on that, but we can infer from the story. On the surface, it appears based on what Jesus said that Mary got the nard to help embalm his body and impulsively poured it out prematurely, but Jesus defines the meaning of what she did, the true underlying purpose, not her motive. Mary anointed Jesus' feet as an act of pure devotion, pure adoration, pure worship. It was an expression of extravagant love that knew no inhibition or shame, fostered by a deep humility that honored Jesus, without regard for cost.

What motivates us to worship Jesus? Do we come here, in the words of one of the Communion prayers, “for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only and not renewal,” or do we worship, in the words of other prayers, “that we might live no longer for ourselves, but for him who died and rose for us,” “to offer and present . . . our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice”?

Now there’s nothing wrong with approaching the altar of grace with the hope of healing, with the hope of being lifted up and receiving wisdom and guidance. All of these reasons to worship acknowledge our dependence on God for everything worthwhile in life. Coming here in hope of having our needs met serve as a witness to our faith, to our humble reliance on Jesus for spiritual nourishment and growth.

However, Mary seems to want nothing more than to be in the presence of Jesus, to praise and adore him, to give rather than to receive. What marks her extravagant act of adoration as noble is the simplicity of her motive, a generosity unmingled with self-regard, which propelled her to sacrifice, not because Jesus had earned or deserved it, or because she hoped to receive some reward in return, but because of her love for him, kindled by his love for her.

When we approach Jesus with purity of heart to be present with him and for him, then true love abides and God accepts the extravagant sacrifice, represented by our version of costly nard. But what of the poor? Adoration of Jesus, while sometimes mystical and even ecstatic, propels us to a practical end. We cannot adore Jesus and ignore the poor. This is more than a moral imperative. It is a fact of natural law.

When we adore Christ in worship, the impulse to justice, mercy, and compassion becomes irresistible, and the absence or presence of this impulse serves as a test of the authenticity of our adoration of Jesus. If the impulse is present, the adoration is real and the

extravagance is reckoned as holy by God. If not, the extravagance is a self-indulgent fraud, comparable with Judas disingenuously advocating for the poor.

Yet how can we be more like Mary? I don't think there's a recipe or formula for that. It takes commitment, certainly, and an openness to change and risk, but for Mary, it was about her brother, Lazarus, raised from the dead. She saw and believed. How could she not? Now none of us have had that type of experience, where the power of God embodied in Jesus was simply undeniable, but the life of the Risen Christ lurks all around us, if we have eyes to see and hearts ready to faith.

Think of a time when you experienced resurrection. Not the emergence of a corpse from the cave, as it was with Lazarus, but the resurrection power that mends broken lives, the power that finds us when we're lost, that creates opportunity in the midst of seeming impossibility. It's doesn't have to be anything enormous or profound for it to be real and meaningful. Focus on that blessing and the gratitude you feel, that overwhelming, electrifying sense of awe and wonder that you might be the recipient of such a gift.

Every time we do this, we become more like Mary. Our adoration of Jesus rises up within us, and we kneel at his feet, and pour out the nard of our souls, and God accepts the sacrifice, and our acceptance inspires us to seek out Jesus in the ever-present poor, finding him there, ready to share with us in the joy of the resurrection. Amen.