

John 12:1-8

This is a story of sacrifice and love contrasted against greed. Mary in this gospel story is not to be confused with the woman who came to Jesus when he was eating at the Pharisee's house, this is Mary of the Mary, Martha and Lazarus family.

While Jesus was at the table with his disciples Mary opened what was likely her most precious possession, a jar of nard. Pure nard. From the Himalayas. That's over 3,000 miles away from where Mary lived, obviously brought by a trading caravan at a great expense. The opened jar of nard would have filled their home with its rich, musky scent as Mary poured the best on the Best. Mary was generous in her love for Jesus who had restored life to Lazarus her brother. As a woman she was naturally a servant, she definitely was a believer that Jesus was the Messiah, yet she was even more than this. In her actions she was unknowingly anointing Jesus for his death on the cross, she was prophesying what was to come. Mary's intimate act of washing his feet with perfume and drying them with her hair put her face right next to Jesus' feet in humble subservience, knowing that he would welcome her gesture.

Normally the entire body would have been anointed with spices and oil after death; Mary anointed Jesus' feet, the feet that carried good news to the world. The timeframe for this dinner was six days before the Passover. The time after this act of compassion was difficult for Jesus as he entered Jerusalem to joyfully shouting crowds, followed a week later by his arrest and death on a cross, the most humiliating form of Roman torture. From the time his feet have been anointed until he was hanging on the cross his feet had not been washed, and he carried the smell of Mary's pure devotion to his death.

Ah, but not all present in the household were pleased with her sacrifice! Judas, the one who carried the money, the one who acted as treasurer, and often used the money for himself, loudly protested the fact that she had wasted this expensive gift worth 300 denarii, an amount that equaled 300 day's wages. That perfume could have been sold, and the money used to feed the poor. 300 days wages! Consider a person who makes 12.00 an hour and works an 8 hour day. 300 days wages is a little over a year's salary, before taxes it would be \$28,800.00. That's 96 weeks of food at today's cost of food, 96 families could be fed for a week from the cost of that perfume. No wonder the treasurer was incensed. Although, to be sure, Judas didn't care about the poor. No, Judas cared about Judas. The scripture tells us he helped himself to the common purse.

How did Jesus respond? He stood up for Mary. He was not going to let her be denied her show of dedication and love. He told Judas that the poor will always be on the earth but he, Jesus, would not.

These words of Jesus have led people to the erroneous belief they have no responsibility to care for the poor among us. Jesus said there will always be the poor, why should I throw my money away when there is no erasing poverty from the earth? But is that what Jesus is really saying? No! No, he's not saying that at all. Through these words he is saying to Judas, 'If you're so concerned about how this money was used instead of helping the poor, you get out there and help them; do something about their poverty.' Mary did not waste her costly ointment by washing Jesus' feet, she had bought it for the day of his burial, and was using it in a way that would carry Jesus through the difficulties of the upcoming days. He would carry the scent with him through his last days on earth. What Mary had done was an act of a true disciple.

The new Lutheran hymnal supplement, All Creation Sings, has a hymn based on John 12 that was commissioned to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the ordination of women in the ELCA: Holy Woman, Graceful Giver #1002 in All Creation Sings
It is a beautiful hymn:

Holy woman, graceful giver,
prophet, servant, and believer,
Mary with the ointment jar,
sought the Christ, by scorn undaunted,
knelt in love, his feet anointed
for his coming burial hour,
for his coming burial hour.

How the fragrance filled the dwelling!
How the act of beauty welling
blest all those within the place!
How the act of pure devotion,
whisp'ring of his coming passion,
blest the heart of Christ with grace,
blest the heart of Christ with grace!

Lovingly Christ stilled the scoffer
who would grasping guard the coffer,
pointing to a hidden trove:
Not all treasures gain and profit;
feed the poor, and feed the spirit
acts of beauty, act of love,
acts of beauty, acts of love.

Though disdained or though contested,
acts of love are never wasted:
Beauty is a face of God.
Graceful Mary, by your giving,
you have shown a way of living:
acts of beauty, love and good;
acts of beauty, love and good.

You see, Mary was generous in her acts of love Judas expressed his greed when he challenged her actions. Which of them did Jesus confront? Who's actions did Jesus affirm? What would Jesus say about your actions?

We are 2 weeks away from Easter, are you drawing closer to God, or hasn't this Lenten season made a difference?

May your response to his love be an act of generous giving of your best.
All glory be to God.