

Fifth Sunday in Lent, April 3, 2022
 “A Gift from the Heart” (John 12:1-8)

Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor? If we think about it, that’s not a bad question. Judas may have been a thief and informant, he may have embezzled money from the common purse, he may have had other motives besides the moral high road he portrays here, but his objection is basically sound. Couldn’t the money have been used to buy food for a starving family or to improve the miserable housing in Jesus’ neighborhood?

We’re told that Mary’s generous act was quite costly. Judas suggests that the going rate for this extravagant perfume – imported from northern India – was 300 denarii. Biblical scholars tell us that a denarius was a day’s wage for most people. If we do the math, figuring a six day work week, we’re looking at close to a year’s salary. Convert that to today’s economy, and – conservatively speaking – we’re talking over \$30,000 poured onto Jesus.

So, why does Mary do such a thing? Jesus suggests that the perfume has something to do with his upcoming burial. To understand what Jesus means, we need to know something of Jewish burial customs. Under these customs, the body is first washed then it is anointed with aromatic spices and perfumes. That is why on Easter Sunday the women went to Jesus’ tomb, carrying spices to give his body a proper burial. According to Jesus, Mary was preparing him for burial. Maybe he was hinting that it would not be possible to prepare his body after he had died – which we know turned out to be the case.

But Mary could not know that. Even if she does know, doesn’t she go a little overboard with the funeral expenses? It’s like a family choosing the most expensive casket just to have it buried in the ground. That’s essentially what happens to the perfume. It’s wasted. A year’s salary could have helped a lot of people. That is Judas’ point; and not a bad point, even if he is a thief.

But Jesus says, *Leave her alone*. And then he says something that sounds somewhat callous. *You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me*. Now what does Jesus mean by that? Is he giving us the green light to spend our money on sprucing up our church building and filling it with all kinds of ornate fixtures to his glory, rather than using our resources to help those in need? Hardly. He is saying that Mary’s action – as extravagant as it might be – is coming from a heart of love. And he will accept this display of devotion.

A number of years back I performed the wedding ceremony for a young couple at St James. Afterward, they gave me a financial gift that I felt was quite extravagant. Having done their premarital counseling, I knew they needed that money a whole lot more than I did. I considered giving part or all of it back to them, but then I realized that it was given out of love, appreciation, and thankfulness for the interest I’d taken in them. If I tried to return it, I risked offending them and taking away the joy they had in giving it. All I could do was say *Thank you*. You all have received gifts of appreciation from people, gifts you probably didn’t need and would never use. But you don’t risk damaging that relationship by refusing the gift. You simply accept it.

Well, if Jesus accepted a \$30,000 foot massage, would he also drive a Lexus? Would he ski at Aspen and vacation in the Virgin Islands? Would he stay at the Hyatt Regency? To ask these questions is to miss the point. Jesus was a friend of the poor and downtrodden. Scripture is filled with examples.

But let's recall the setting of this story. On this night, Jesus is eating dinner with a grateful family. Do you remember why they are so grateful? It's because there is one sitting at the table who should not be.

In the previous chapter, when Jesus arrives in Bethany, he is met by two sisters who are deeply grieved. *Lord, if you had been here, our brother would not have died.* Lazarus had been dead four days when Jesus arrived, even though Jesus was notified of his sickness in enough time to make the journey. But Jesus waited in order that he might demonstrate God's power. He went to the tomb of Lazarus, called his name, and this dead brother came back to life. And so, this is a celebration dinner – not unlike the celebration the father in last week's parable threw for his wasteful son. *We had to celebrate for my son was dead, but is alive again.* If you had grieved the death of your loved one for four days and then he or she is suddenly back in your life, wouldn't you celebrate? Wouldn't you find a way to show your gratitude to the one responsible?

Martha is grateful too. I'm sure the house is spic and span, the table set with the good china, and her very best recipes are being served up. Unlike usual meals after a funeral, the deceased is there in flesh and blood. They have to celebrate! And everyone is having a great time.

Then into this party atmosphere walks Mary with a jar of expensive perfume. Her grateful response has prompted her to bring out what could be a nest egg for the family. This perfume may well reflect the investment of their life savings, their 401k, if you will. To the amazement of those who watch, she lavishly anoints the feet of the one to whom she owes everything.

Maybe she overdoes it. Maybe, in her joy, she just gets carried away. But, should Jesus scold her for wasting this expensive gift in such a foolish way? *Leave her alone,* he says. This is a dinner where two grateful sisters are giving thanks to Jesus for restoring a once-dead brother. But, again, is this response too extravagant? Does Mary overdo it? Probably. But how could Jesus do anything except receive the gift of these grateful sisters who bring him a present from their once-broken hearts? So Mary anoints Jesus' feet.

And in the next chapter, we find Jesus *washing* the feet of his disciples, an action that clearly points to service in the world. John seems to be making the connection between honoring Jesus and serving him, between loving God and loving neighbor.

Maybe Mary does go overboard in honoring Jesus. Maybe she does overdo it. But that's not really a problem we have, is it? Our problem is usually *underdoing* it, offering Jesus a trivial and miserly response to his blessings. Our problem is taking Jesus for granted, going days without consulting him in prayer, assuming that he's aware of our gratitude and thankfulness. Maybe we're busy working in the community. Maybe we're taking care of the needy. Perhaps we're doing many good things. But if we neglect our relationship with the one who sends us out into the world, we're only giving him lip service.

If we look closely at this story, we'll see that it's not about thriftiness or money at all, even though it seems to be. No, this story is about gratitude and recognizing what Christ has done in our lives. Whether we're rich or poor, there's a common call for us to stop, slow down, and give thanks. There will be time to serve the poor. As Jesus says, they are always with us. And this statement could not be more true in our world today.

Our honoring of Jesus may not involve money or perfume at all. But the act of honoring him, like Mary's, will fill the church with a certain fragrance. It is the fragrance of love, devotion, and gratitude for the one who has loved us so lavishly and in such a costly, costly way.

Mary's gift was both costly and extravagant, even lavish. She was overcome with joy and thankfulness. Maybe she overdid it. But on a Friday afternoon so many years ago, Jesus offered his own costly and extravagant gift. Let us pray that we will not "underdo" it as we seek to honor him in our lives.

Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?

Jesus brought life into Mary's world of death, and she was grateful. He's done the same for us. His death on the cross has stripped away death's power and his resurrection gives us the promise of new life. Three hundred denarii couldn't begin to touch it. No, this gift is priceless because it comes from God's heart of love. How will you respond to this extravagant gift?