

**Bible Reading**

12Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.<sup>2</sup>There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.<sup>3</sup>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.<sup>4</sup>But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said,<sup>5</sup>"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"<sup>6</sup>(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.)<sup>7</sup>Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial."<sup>8</sup>You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."<sup>9</sup>When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.<sup>10</sup>So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well,<sup>11</sup>since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

**Sermon**



The smell of chlorine wafts through the air  
and suddenly you're back at the neighborhood pool  
where you first learned to swim.  
Or perhaps it's a whiff of gardenia  
that sends you back to home you grew up in.  
Or maybe even the smell of an old, old church.  
I clearly remember the first time I walked into our sanctuary  
when I was interviewing...  
I was transported by its smell  
back to I church I served in Louisville...  
both sanctuaries were built more than a century ago.

Words go to the thinking part of the brain.  
But smells and fragrances, where do they go?  
They go to the emotional part...to the amygdala.  
That's why for my daughters,

just a whiff of Tea Rose perfume  
brings my mother, their Gammi, back to them...  
if only for a moment.

This morning's passage from John's gospel  
is nothing if not a "fragrant" text.  
Jesus' friend Mary takes a pound of very expensive perfume  
and with it, she bathes his feet.

I imagined for a brief moment this week  
buying a bunch of those plug-in fragrance devices  
so that when you walked in this morning  
this space would be filled with a pleasing aroma.

However, I quickly realized  
NOT ALL OF YOU would find that pleasing.  
Plus, I heard that some human-made fragrances  
are full of toxic chemicals... so I scrapped the idea.

But there were no toxic chemicals  
in the perfume Mary used to anoint Jesus –  
it was pure nard... very, very expensive nard –  
Judas estimated it would fetch 300 denarii...  
which scholars say was an entire year's income  
for a day laborer –  
in today's currency as much as \$10,000.



Yet, that's not all.  
Mary's extravagance is shown in other ways as well –  
some of them quite intimate and sensual.  
For example, she loosens her hair in a room full of men –  
something respectable women never did.  
Then she poured the balm on Jesus' feet – also never done...  
the head maybe... but never the feet.  
Then she touches him –  
a single woman caressing the feet of a rabbi  
was completely inappropriate.  
And finally, you might be excused for blushing -  
Mary wiped the perfume into his feet  
with her long, flowing hair.  
You can just imagine how shocked and uncomfortable  
the other guests must have been.

Well, in spite of all that...  
or maybe because of all that...  
each of the Gospels include some version of this story...  
all four of them... but it is Matthew who adds  
these memorable words:  
"I tell you the truth," the Lord said,  
"wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world,  
what she has done will be told in memory of her."  
Remember that...  
Jesus says *wherever* the Gospel story is told—  
this thing that Mary did that day will be talked about.

To my knowledge,  
Jesus never said this about any other woman...  
or man for that matter.  
And what that means to me  
is there must be deep, deep meaning in what Mary did...  
meaning for Jesus...  
and meaning for us as his followers.  
Allow me to offer three.

First, Mary was able to express her love for Jesus  
in a way that was meaningful to him.  
We may love someone...  
and truly want to express our love for them...  
but unless we show love  
in a way that means something to them,  
it will not be received as we intend.  
She wanted to show him how much she loved him...  
she wanted him to know that she understood  
he was about to bear unspeakable rejection and pain  
as he set his face toward Jerusalem and the cross.  
HE had identified with HER struggles in life...  
now SHE wanted to identify with HIM in a way that said:  
"I understand... I get it... I thank you."  
I don't know about you,  
but this is something that I am still learning.  
As a husband and father,  
I feel love for Kris and my girls.  
I might even tell them I love them  
and try to show them I love them.  
But that's not enough.  
Because for them to KNOW that I love them  
I have to get into their mind and heart

and find out what is most meaningful to them...  
I have to "get them"  
and then to give love in that way.  
Mary expressed her love in a most profound and lovely way...  
a way that obviously meant a lot to Jesus...  
so much so he said that wherever the Gospel is preached,  
what Mary has done will always--always--be remembered.



It makes you wonder  
how Mary came to know the Lord so well  
that she understood what to do?  
I mean, how did she know that something so bizarre...  
so utterly absurd...  
so outside the bounds of acceptable behavior...  
would mean so much?  
Well, when you think back on the Gospel story,  
where do we often find Mary?  
We find her at the feet of Jesus...  
seems like she's always at the feet of Jesus.  
And there's something very special  
about people who spend a lot of time at Jesus' feet.  
You just sort of know it when you are with them.  
There's a grounded-ness and authenticity about them...  
there's a wisdom and spiritual maturity...  
there's an unselfishness and compassion  
in people who sit at the feet of Jesus.  
Mary did that... a lot!  
And that's why she understood what was going on...  
that events were careening toward a horrible end...  
and that Jesus was about to die.

Judas, of course, is oblivious...  
he thinks this is a complete waste!  
"That 10,000 bucks could have been given to the poor," he said.  
And he's right! He's absolutely right!  
I might say the same thing.

But in verse 7, Jesus says:

*"Leave her alone;*

*it was intended that she should save this perfume  
for the day of my burial."*

Or let me paraphrase... Jesus is telling Judas,

*"Stop annoying this woman.*

*She alone, out of all of you, understands.*

*She, alone, is the one who really gets it."*

And the reason she gets it

is that she has spent so much time at Jesus' feet.

Friends, you and I live in an instantaneous society.

We expect everything to come right away...

INCLUDING our relationship with Christ.

A little worship here, a quick prayer there,

serve at the soup kitchen each Thanksgiving...

we expect instantaneous impact.

But what we learn from this faithful woman

is there is no substitute for taking the time...

day by day... year after year...

to sit at the feet of Jesus.



The third deep meaning we might take from this story

is that of all the people there at that dinner party...

including the recently resuscitated Lazarus himself...

of all the people at that dinner party,

only Mary was ready and willing

to give her most valuable possession to Jesus.

Barbara Brown Taylor compares Mary's costly perfume

to those high-end wine auctions

when fabulously old bottles

are discovered in some castle cellar...

and then are sold for thousands,

even millions of dollars at auction.

What everybody knows

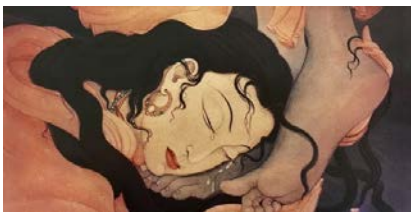
is that these wines are not bought to be drunk,

but to be kept and admired...

or maybe sold again for a profit.

They are precious substances to be saved, not used.  
But Mary does just that...  
    she uses that which is precious to her...  
        she GIVES AWAY what is very precious to her...  
and that's why,  
    whenever the Gospel is preached throughout the entire world,  
        what Mary did will always be remembered.

As I end this sermon,  
    I have two things more I want to leave with you.  
First, those last words in verse 3:  
    *And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.*  
Of course, when Mary broke open the box of nard  
    the fragrance just exploded... it went everywhere.  
There was no way you could miss it –  
    it literally filled the house!  
But not only the house...  
because when Mary  
    wiped the ointment into his feet with her hair,  
        the fragrance was transferred to her...  
            to her hair and her hands...  
so that the blessing she had given to Jesus before his death  
    now went with her as well.  
And now... WHEREEver she went after that...  
    WHENever people saw her they also smelled her –  
        they caught a whiff of the precious nard  
            and perhaps would think of Jesus.



Finally this. Let's remember that all this happened  
    just days before Jesus's crucifixion...  
and that the fragrance  
    of such a strong perfume as nard  
        would have lasted a long time on the Lord's feet.  
So that the fragrance went with Jesus as well –  
    as he washed his disciples feet...  
        as he rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday...  
    as he cleansed the Temple...  
        as he gathered with his disciples in an Upper Room...

as he appeared before the High Priest and Pilate...  
as he was tortured by the soldiers.  
Even on the cross,  
I wonder if the fragrance of Mary's perfume  
still lingered faintly as a reminder of her great love?  
As a reminder that, even in the face of such hatred,  
he had been greatly loved.  
"I tell you the truth," Jesus said,  
Wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world,  
what she has done will be told in memory of her."  
And that's why I've told you again, today. Amen.