

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Did today's gospel passage from St. John rub you the wrong way? This just does not sound like the Jesus we have come to know. So, what is going on?

Passover is less than a week away. Jesus and his disciples have returned to Bethany and are visiting the home of their friend Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha. We are reminded that this occurs after Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead, and a dinner is being given in honor of Jesus and his disciples.

Remember that this is the Mary of the Mary and Martha sister pair. Elsewhere in the gospels, we had heard the separate story when Martha was working in the kitchen while Mary was seated with Jesus and learning among the others, and Martha complained about it. Remember that story?

We should consider that side story as significant, because we can presume that Mary was, in the regular course, a dedicated and committed follower of Jesus. She listened very hard and very closely to what he said, and also, with keen observation and concentration, she followed and saw what he did.

The recent messages of Jesus to his disciples had included increased references to his immediate death only a short week away. We already know the responsive reactions by the disciples to his statements, and those reactions varied. Some were outright rejection of the notion that he was going to die very soon. Others were in argument favoring other alternatives. And still other reactions by the disciples showed their outright denial of the entire thing altogether.

So, as close of a follower as she was, it is reasonable to presume that this sister Mary was like all the others...and that she had the impending death and burial of Jesus on her mind. And, like all the others, she did not want to give in to the idea that Jesus was about to die any more than anyone else in the house. After all, Jesus raised her brother from the dead.

Perhaps she anointed his feet because she loved Jesus and was showing her heartfelt devotion to him. The nard plant was used by the wealthy as a perfume, but for the more common people, it was reserved as a burial ointment to offset the odor of decomposition. They were still six days away from Passover and his destiny, so this is a rather symbolic act on her part...her way of being there for Jesus. He spent so much of his time and energy focusing on the needs of others, so now this is Mary's opportunity to give herself to his needs.

That all seems to make sense to us. To be in line, and not out of the ordinary within our understanding of this gospel story...until we realize the extent of what was given. And then I begin to find myself taking the side of Judas in the argument.

The first hint comes from the perfume itself. We already mentioned that it was used as perfume for the wealthy. But, to use a whole pound of nard on Jesus? This stuff was unbelievably expensive.

Worth a whole year's wages in that time.

Forget the obvious editorializing about the motives of Judas. The comment about Judas complaining of wasted value as set around his intention to betray Jesus could easily be discounted....a later editor's desire to justify and explain the whole conversation in a certain way. Instead, on the surface of it, Judas seems to have every right to object against what appears to be an unjustified overindulgence...even if it is for Jesus. After all, why not use just a drop of this stuff on him, and sell the rest and put it to good use, like buying blankets for the homeless or feeding hungry children? Jesus would understand.

And then, wipe his feet with her hair? That is not right either. In the time of Jesus, women did not appear in the company of men with their hair down. They kept it tightly wound in a bun and covered. Judas had every reason to protest...future betrayer or not...because this was so not like everyone's experience with and around Jesus.

But this sister Mary holds nothing back. She pours the entire, ultra-expensive contents of the bottle all over the feet of Jesus, along with her tears, and wipes both with her hair. The whole house, says John's gospel, "was filled with the fragrance of the perfume".

Perhaps she was so overwhelmed by his presence and of what was to come, hers was an uncontrollable act of pure compulsion. Have you ever done something on impulse that was somewhat out of character for you? Let's say you are very close with your money, counting every penny, and one day, without giving it much thought, you go out and blow it all on an extravagance. A self-indulgence. This perfume was the most precious thing she owned, and she wanted to share it with Jesus... all of it... every last drop. If she thought of the consequences or the cost, it did not matter. Showing her love for Jesus was all that counted.

Well, up to that point, we might conclude that the lesson from this gospel story is that, like sister Mary, we should give our all...give our very best...to Jesus as the very Son of God, and that is the end of the sermon and Amen.

But, again, the never failing and always present theme of the gospels always is really not on Jesus directly, but rather how he in turn directs to God the Father. His very existence, his mission, his life, his presence, his message. Everything. All of him. All of it...is directed to God his Father. So, somehow there seems to be a better fit within our understanding of what this might mean.

Looking at it again, we know this is no ordinary visit for Jesus and Mary and Martha. It is a farewell dinner. He has come to say good bye. They will never have a chance to be together like this again. It is their last supper, as in just a few days, he will be arrested, tried and sentenced to die on a cross. And so, this is no time for restraint, but rather a time for holy extravagance.

This spirit of holy extravagance occurs a week later. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, both members of the Jewish council and both secret followers of Jesus, took the body of Jesus from the cross to a nearby tomb where they lovingly wrapped it in a linen shroud along with **a hundred pounds** of

myrrh and aloes. William Barclay wrote “it was the Jewish custom to wrap the bodies of the dead in linen clothes and to put sweet spices in between the folds of the linen, but Nicodemus brought enough spices for the burial of a king.”

It is the same in the story of Zacchaeus, the little man who climbed up in the sycamore tree to see Jesus when he walked by. Zacchaeus was a miserable tax collector who cheated the people on their taxes and took all he could for himself, and the people despised him and rightly so. But when Jesus came to the tree where Zacchaeus was perched, he looked up into the tree and said, “Zacchaeus, come down, for I am going to your house today”, where Jesus later ate with him. As Luke tells the story, after dinner Zacchaeus announced, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.

This spirit of holy extravagance is what Jesus was teaching about in Matthew, Chapter 13, when he said that the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field...or that it is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Over and over again, we see this pattern. When individuals experience the reality of God’s unconditional acceptance and love, their lives are transformed, their hearts are opened, and they go to any length to express their gratitude for God’s grace.

When the Spirit of God takes hold of our life...when we experience the wonder and joy of God’s peace...when we know in our heart the gift of salvation and the promise of eternal life, it is not enough simply to nod and say, “Ahh, that’s nice. So, what else is new?”

We want to *do something*. Want to tell somebody. Want to share the good news of God’s love with others.

That is what Mary has done. Maybe, on second thought, she knew exactly what she was doing and why she was doing it. And so did Jesus...as he protected her and encouraged her, letting her express in her way...like Zacchaeus before her, and Nicodemus after her...the presence in her heart of this spirit of holy extravagance. And now...seen in that light, it finally makes some sense. After all, with Jesus, it is ALL about God the Father, and letting each of us be free through him to know and love his Father.

A pound of nard perfume on his feet, brushed with her hair, filling the whole house...all in the communal spirit of holiness. Just saying thanks often seems so inadequate, so how better to respond from the deepest places of the heart back to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit?

Amen.