

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

April 3, 2022 – LENT 5, YEAR C

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “*A Scandalous Love*”

Isaiah 43:16-21	(God makes a way in the wilderness)
Psalms 126	(Those who sow with tears shall reap with joy)
Philippians 3:4b-14	(Forget what’s behind; aim for heaven, as we are called by Christ)
St. John 12:1-8	(Jesus is anointed by a woman, prefiguring His death and burial)

In today’s gospel story, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus host a dinner party for their friend, Jesus. Previously, all three siblings had demonstrated for us models of discipleship: Mary was praised by Jesus in Luke’s gospel for sitting at His feet and learning from Him. Even while grieving the death of her brother, Martha confessed her unswerving faith in Jesus as the Messiah. And Lazarus himself, lying in the tomb, obeyed Christ’s call to *come out* and return to life!

That evening, Jesus’ disciples—including Judas Iscariot—also were present. Matthew and Mark both record that the meal was hosted at the home of Simon the Leper (who had, presumably, been cured by Jesus). Whereas, Luke situates the dinner party at the house of an unnamed Pharisee. Was Simon the Leper also a Pharisee? And, was he the father—or some other relative—of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus? One Bible commentator observes that since all four gospels recount this event in such differing ways, “this story raises far more questions than anyone can answer.”¹

So we’ll get back to St. John’s version. In the midst of the party, he writes, “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.” We’re given the impression that, for a moment, time stood still, as the guests were thinking, “Wow. What just happened?”

The perfume Mary used to anoint Jesus’ feet could have been made from spikenard, a plant grown high in the Himalayas and used in Ayurvedic medicine in India. It was a precious commodity that was transported by camel along the ancient Silk Road.² But since John uses the Greek word *myron*, it could have been a generic compound made from nard, which can be mixed with oil from the storax tree—found in the woods of Israel—to create an ointment.³

This is not the kind of perfumed myrrh the Magi brought to the child Jesus, but it still costs nothing less than a king’s fortune to obtain⁴—which Judas angrily points out. (And a “pound of nard” was a *lot!*)

So, the first “scandal” of the evening is Mary’s extravagant use of an astronomically expensive anointing oil. Where did she get it, and how could she have afforded it?

The second “scandal” has to do with the actual anointing of Jesus. Both Mark and Matthew say the unnamed woman anointed Jesus’ *head*, whereas Luke agrees with John that the—once again, anonymous—woman anointed Jesus’ *feet*.⁵

If the guests were reclining on couches, Jesus’ feet would have been accessible for anointing. However, a respectable Jewish woman, especially one as devout as Mary, would never have appeared in public with her hair unbound or uncovered. Perhaps this additional extravagance—the incredibly personal and intimate use of her hair to dry Jesus’ feet—was why the other Gospel writers felt they had to portray the unnamed woman as sinful, possibly a prostitute.

What difference would it make whether Jesus' head or feet were anointed? In historic Israel, the anointing of a king or prophet was done on the *head*, but, writes Bible scholar Raymond Brown, "one does not anoint the feet of a living person ... one might anoint the feet of a corpse as part of the ritual of preparing the whole body for burial."⁶

The third "scandal" of the evening is introduced by Judas: "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" St. John comments: "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."

If we remember that one denarius—the standard silver coin of the Roman Empire—was a day's wage, a little biblical math reveals that 300 denarii was indeed a lot of money. One Bible commentator observes that in our time, this would be like a minimum-wage worker going out and spending \$18,000 on perfume.⁷ That kind of money could have purchased a staggering amount of food for the needy!

Perhaps the fourth "scandal" of this dinner gathering comes when Jesus responds: "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." Next, this rabbi who has taught so extensively on compassion for the poor—and surely knows *every* Scripture verse about caring generosity—adds something even more scandalous: "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." Wow! 'Forget those poor people. I'm the one who's important, here.' Could Jesus actually be saying that? He might have been quoting Deuteronomy 15:11: "there will never cease to be some in need on the earth." Except, the rest of that verse continues, "I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land'."

So what do we make of all this? The reality that Judas misses, as do most of us, is that we are witnessing Jesus' anointing and preparation for death. And it's happening at Simon's house where his children, the raised-from-the-dead, the kitchen server, and the rabbinical student, along with Jesus' motley crew of closest followers, are gathered for a meal. Brown describes this scene as "the culminating expression of loving faith."⁸

Mary's extravagant gesture is in line with the extravagant miracles we see elsewhere in the Gospel of John: the wedding at Cana, when Jesus turns wash water into 180 gallons of the finest wine; feeding the 5,000 with only a handful of food; and the amazing catch that nearly swamps Peter's boat. In John's gospel, Jesus is the agent of overflowing joy and unrestrained abundance.

Mary's anointing is an extravagant act from the heart and makes no "sense" if we look at it from the perspective of "the head." In a world of scarcity and poverty, why would she do such a thing? Judas, though he's portrayed by John as a thief, speaks some common sense here. Why *not* give that money to the poor?

But Mary's intimate, profoundly loving, and sacrificial anointing of Jesus' feet is so "beyond words" that it almost becomes a Sacrament, which, in the Anglican tradition, we define as: "An outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace."

John positions this story right before his account of Jesus' Passion. Thus, Mary poured out the expensive perfume onto Jesus' feet just as Jesus was about to pour out His life in the ultimate costly sacrifice for the whole world. Jesus' priceless offering of Himself, like Mary's toward Him, is also an intimate act of supreme generosity. Mary's outpouring of love for Jesus shows us that we, too, are to respond to Christ's love for us with an outpouring of love for Him and for others, giving ourselves in service to them and to God. Her anointing points toward Jesus' washing the disciples' feet on Maundy Thursday, reminding us that following Jesus through servant discipleship *can* be costly.⁹

Next Sunday we will process joyfully with our palms, singing "Hosanna" ... but we will exit having shouted "Crucify Him!" In that clashing of purposes and emotions, we see both the generosity of Mary and the hypocrisy and betrayal of Judas. Alas, we see our own human imperfection.

But let's not forget that Jesus loved *both* Mary of Bethany and Judas Iscariot unconditionally—the woman who loved Him, and the man who conspired to send Him to the Cross. Jesus loves *every one of us* in all our distinctiveness, and all our brokenness. He loves us when we are being kind, caring, and generous, and in our snarky, selfish, sinful moments, too.

This is the “scandalous love” of Christ—His wondrous love that St. Paul describes so perfectly in Romans 5:6,7-8 (NIV), “When we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: *While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*”

Our Lord Jesus Christ loves us with an extravagance beyond words, and He continues to pour Himself out for us in every Eucharist, renewing all things—you, me, and St. John's Church, Compass—through His boundless love. Thanks be to God! *Amen.*

¹ Soards, Marion, & Thomas Dozeman, Kendall McCabe, *Year C, Lent/Easter: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), p.65.

² Adapt. Haslam, Chris, “Comments,” *Christ Church Cathedral* © 1996-2022 <<http://montreal.anglican.org/comments/clnt5m.shtml>> 28 March 2022.

³ Adapt. Brown, Raymond E., “The Gospel According to John (I-XII),” *The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 448.

⁴ Adapt. Doyle, Andrew C., “Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year C,” 23 March 2022, *Hitchhiking the Word* <<http://hitchhikingthebible.blogspot.com/>> 28 March 2022

⁵ Throckmorton, Burton H., Jr., Ed. *Gospel Parallels: A Comparison of the Synoptic Gospels* (New Revised Standard) (Nashville: Thos. Nelson, 1992 [fifth edition]), pp. 69, 181.

⁶ Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 454.

⁷ Doyle, *op. cit.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Adapt. Foote, Beth Lind, *AllSaintsSSF.org*, 7 April 2019 <<https://allsaintssf.org/2019/04/07/a-sermon-for-lent-v-year-c/>> 28 March 2022.