

I Met Jesus: Mary and Her Gift

John 12:1-8

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Steve DeWitt

There was a very powerful moment in Jesus' ministry. It was so powerful that Jesus declared, *"Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her."* (Matthew 26:13). There's a short list of things that appear in the synoptic gospels and in the gospel of John. Matthew, Mark, and John all record this event. It was a big deal to the gospel writers. It was a big deal to Jesus. It was a big deal to the Holy Spirit who inspired its inclusion in Holy Scripture.

Where are We in the Story?

"Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at the table." (John 12:1-2)

This moment comes very shortly on the heels of Jesus' most dramatic miracle, the healing of Lazarus from the dead in John 11:1-44. We took two weeks on that passage and were introduced to two sisters: Martha the oldest and Mary the younger. We saw from this and other passages that they were in many ways typical sisters. Martha the oldest was very concerned with things and scurried around taking care of things as the responsible older sister. She had an air of self-righteousness about her and famously asked Jesus to tell her sister Mary to get up and help her with meal preparations. She was a little domineering at times, but Jesus loved her as a dear friend, so we'll give her grace for how much she reminds of us of our oldest sisters.

Then there is Mary, the younger. Mary is very much the opposite of Martha. She is less concerned with busyness and details and more concerned with spiritual matters. She was most often seen at the feet of Jesus. She learned at Jesus' feet. She mourned at Jesus' feet. And in our passage today, she worshipped at Jesus feet.

John 11:35 places the timing before Passover. This is the third Passover of Jesus' public ministry and this meal would seem to have occurred on Saturday night. *"Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany..."* The next day Jesus will ride from Bethany into Jerusalem on a donkey to the cheers of the whole city as he presents himself to them as King and Messiah of Israel.

The scene on Saturday night is what we would call a party. It was a dinner in Jesus' honor and included a meal. It is helpful to the story to understand how they would sit at a table and eat. It's different from how we do it. We sit upright on chairs at a table that is even higher than the chairs. Their normal was a low table and they would lay around it with their feet outward and their head near the table propped up on an elbow (see picture at the top of the next page).



The guest list for the party includes:

Martha – What is she doing? Serving. No surprise here. She was probably up early making preparations. With the arrival of the guests, she was a tornado of activity. We all know people who thrive in moments like this.

Lazarus – John repeats that Lazarus is “whom Jesus raised from the dead” as if we could have forgotten already who Lazarus is. Can you imagine the conversation at the table? “So Lazarus, you were dead?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s it like to be dead?”

Jesus – Guest of honor

The disciples – Matthew and Mark make it clear they are there too.

Can you see this? There are at least 16 people (likely more) propped up on an elbow with their legs outward eating a great meal. Something’s about to happen that would make it famous for all time. Someone not mentioned suddenly steps into the scene. Mary, sister of Lazarus, makes a most dramatic entrance.

Mary's Extravagant Gift (John 12:3)

Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

There is something very special about this gift. Again, so unique as to illicit Jesus' statement, *wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.* (Matthew 26:13). What was so special about this gift? Let me tell you what it wasn't.

It wasn't the perfume

This is not to say that the perfume isn't an important part of this story. This wasn't your average ointment. It was pure nard. Very expensive perfume. It was not grown in Israel; it was grown in India and imported. They didn't have air freight and railroad systems. It was carried on foot, by hand or caravan. Can you imagine what UPS would charge if they had to walk their packages everywhere? The perfume itself and the shipping costs made nard extremely expensive and valuable.

It wasn't the perfume itself. It wasn't that it was Jesus' favorite anointing oil. It's not about the perfume or its particular fragrance.

It wasn't the value of the perfume

This is not to say that the value isn't part of the story, because it is. Somehow Mary had in her possession a large amount of it. English translations say it was a pound; more accurately from the original text it was around 12 ounces. How valuable is this perfume? The text says in verse 5 that the value of 12 ounces was 300 denarii. 300 denarii was the average yearly salary of the day. To put that in modern numbers for average salary, this perfume was around \$4,000 an ounce. All 12 ounces would be around \$50,000. To make it personal, some here make more than \$50,000 a year. Her gift was your annual income. Think about that number.

What did Mary do with this most valued possession? This is 12 ounces of water. She just poured it out on Jesus. [Pastor Steve pours 12 ounces of water into a clear container.]

But this isn't what impressed Jesus or made this moment so memorable. It wasn't the perfume and it wasn't its value.

Mary's extravagant gift was her complete devotion and sacrifice

Devotion

Her devotion is seen in her actions. She anointed Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair. There are two things going on here. Like today, for a first century woman her hair was very personal to her. Ladies, you understand this more than us men. Although that's not true for all men. In fact, I got my hair cut last week and made the comment that men don't care too much about their hair. The lady cutting hair next to me let out a laugh. Apparently she had a few male customers who would give the women a run for their money. Generally speaking, a woman's hair is very personal and important to her. They were the same back then. They would tie or braid their hair. To let their hair down in public was viewed shamefully. Mary lets down her hair and puts her head by Jesus feet.

Feet were the opposite of hair. In a culture that wore sandals and walked everywhere, feet were always dirty and to touch the feet of someone else was considered demeaning. Slaves did that. This was part of Jesus' powerful lesson in washing the disciples' feet.

What does Mary do? She brings the vial of precious perfume, gets on her knees, and pours it over his feet (other gospels include head as well). She takes her hair – so personal to her – and unbinds it and puts her face by his feet so she can wipe his feet with her hair. One person comments, "*The least of Jesus is worth the best of us.*" There is nothing unseemly going on here. What is it? Absolute and full devotion of heart and worship to Christ.

Sacrifice

This seems so over the top, doesn't it? If you are thinking this, you are unfortunately in agreement with Judas who is indignant at the waste of money. He says, *Why wasn't this sold and given to the poor?* We're not going to get into that all this week, but what is clear to everyone around is that this was a sacrifice of immense proportion. They are thinking purely in financial categories. Judas was thinking that.

Is that what Jesus is thinking? No. ***This moment earns the admiration of the Son of God because it was Mary showing materially where her heart was spiritually.***

One trusted commentator gives the insight that something this valuable was possibly part of family dowry. A dowry was a gift that was given to the groom for marrying the daughter. Mary was single. If this is the case, what Mary is pouring out to Jesus was her dream of marriage as well. To give the dowry is to give the dream. For those of us who are single, this is a particularly powerful example of offering our singleness to Jesus as an act of worship. Mary gave that dream to Jesus. "Jesus, you are more important to me than even my dream of a husband and children. I give this freely to you." Her real gift here is not the perfume or its value but the more valuable gift of her total devotion to the Lord.

This is what Jesus admires – a heart of complete surrender. A heart of complete worship. A heart of complete devotion. That was Mary. Her heart was her extravagant gift.

Some of you may be sitting here thinking, "I am so relieved. I was afraid you were going to say we need to give with financial extravagance to God, but what I hear you saying is all I have to give him is my heart."

Thoughts like this betray us and reveal where our hearts are. How do we know that Mary's heart was completely devoted to Christ? Her words? Her promises? Her heart of worship produced a willingness to give to Jesus her most valued treasure.

There is a direct line between our spiritual treasure and our material treasure. Jesus said this as well in Matthew 6:21, *Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

How we use money and possessions reveals more clearly than anything else what the real priorities of our hearts are.

Mary is a shining example of this, but not the only one in the text. This is true in the positive and in the negative. The story goes on.

But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" He said this, not

because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it. (John 12:4-6)

Judas' apparent concern for the poor was a mask for greed. Was Judas really concerned with helping the poor? No. His real concern was helping himself. His pious statement was a mask for the idol of money in his heart. He reminds me of so many of our politicians who preach they are advocates for the poor and legislate money to social needs, but then their own charitable giving records come out and they have given next to nothing personally. It's always easy to be generous with other people's money, especially taxpayer money. *Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

Where's your heart today? How can you know? A great place to look is in your checkbook. It was true with Mary. It was true with Judas.

The real goal in our capital campaign is not money. The real goal is a congregation of Marys. Full devotion spiritually producing lives of generosity materially.

I was recently on a retreat with some leaders in our church. We got talking about being Dutch. I'm Dutch if you didn't know. Dutch people are known for being extremely frugal and I've joked about that as it relates to me over the years. You may have noticed I haven't for some time. I told the leaders I don't want the reputation of being cheap. I want to be known for being generous. Generosity is a sign of a heart that truly loves the Lord.

There are many Judases in God's church. Like Judas, we mentally use so many escape hatches when it comes to generosity to the Lord and his work.

- *I forgot...again*
- *We give with our time and in other ways*
- *God wants me to meet the needs of my family first*
- *We're not in a position to give to God right now*

They seem to be in position to give to the car dealer, the golf course, the nail salon, Direct TV, Apple computers, custom home builders, airlines, Netflix, and on and on. Sounds pious and there may be special circumstances, but when we pour all our money on ourselves and have nothing left for God, who am I looking more like, Mary or Judas?

Let's compare Judas and Mary:

Mary

Considered disciple of Jesus
Gave extravagant gift
Gave \$50,000 to Jesus
Loved Jesus
Giver
Real disciple?

Judas

Considered disciple of Jesus
Criticized extravagant gift (waste of money)
Betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver
Loved money
Thief
Real disciple?

Who wants to be more like Judas? You could misunderstand this and this happens a lot. To be a disciple I need to give money to Jesus. No. That's manipulation and a works salvation.

What was Mary's gift? A material expression of a spiritual devotion. Why was it so extravagant? Her devotion to Jesus was extravagant. This is why Mary is such an iconic person in the story. She is an example of someone whose affection for Jesus matched her worth. She's not calculating the worth of the anointing. She's not tithing merely 10% of it. She gives it all to him. [Pastor Steve again pours 12 ounces of water into a clear container.]

Mary met Jesus. That moment at the tomb watching Lazarus walk out transformed her. She became a giver. Nothing would she withhold. Not her most valuable possession. Not her dreams of marriage and children. Not her personal reputation. Not her hair. Not her dignity. Not her nothing. Everything was his.

That is the key to a lifestyle of generosity and these two things fly in formation together: devotion to God and generosity. That's the real goal here. We get that right and everything we need for God's plans for us will be fully met. Mary's gift was her extravagant heart.

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