

**A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
“Mary Anoints Jesus’ Feet with Perfume”**

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John 12:1-8

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This little story in the gospel of John is very beautiful. It is about abundant, gracious, spontaneous, self-giving generosity. What is more, it happened on the Sabbath day, the day of rest, so life moves a little slower on that day. The Sabbath day gives you a chance to breath a little slower, linger a little longer with good friends. Jesus is in the home of His good friends: the siblings, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. They are having a feast with two guests of honor: Lazarus, who just recently was dead and now is alive, and Jesus, who raised him from the dead. John 11 tells that story.

There’s this expensive beautiful perfume. Mary, at least as depicted in art, has this beautiful long hair that she lets down. And she performs a beautiful act by washing Jesus’ feet and wiping them off with her hair.

Washing feet is an act that Jesus will perform in the next chapter to His disciples. But Mary’s was particularly precious. She didn’t just wash His feet. She anointed them with this very expensive perfume, the fragrance of which filled the whole house.

It’s a story with beautiful images. It’s a beautiful story.

It’s also a story that is very strange.

First of all . . . anything involving Lazarus at this point in the story is just strange. He was dead just a chapter earlier you know. And Jesus goes right back to the place, the little town of Bethany on the outskirts of Jerusalem, where the authorities were looking for Him. You might think that anyone who can call another man to come out of a tomb would be pretty much allowed to do whatever He wanted. But with Jesus it was quite the opposite. The more amazing good He did, the more they clamped down on Him and looked for a reason to stop Him.

Another strange part of the story is the pound of perfume, apparently worth a year’s wages. Where did that come from? Was it left over from Lazarus death—that’s what they were going to use on him? Possibly. But then why didn’t they use it? If you remember from John 11, when Jesus proposes to roll away the stone from the tomb, Martha, ever practical, protests—and this can really only be read in the King James—“By this time he stinketh” (John 11:39). Possibly the greatest single line in all of scripture.

So if Lazarus stinketh, that means they had not treated and anointed his body for burial. Why not? Why did they save this expensive perfume only now to ‘waste it’ on Jesus who clearly wasn’t dead? Or was He?

Well, He was as good as dead. And it seems that everyone knew it. The gathering clouds of doom hang thick over this friendly fellowship meal. By coming back

to Bethany, back to the place where they were looking for Him, particularly at the Passover time when tensions were exceptionally high and security was especially tight, Jesus was sealing His own fate. They would arrest Him.

And Mary pours this perfume, not on His head, like you would anoint a king in celebration, but His feet as a sign of His death. This story keeps getting stranger.

And then Judas . . . what's Judas doing there anyway? Is he the only disciple there? Where are the others? In the Matthew account of this story, it's said that "the disciples protested . . ." (Matthew 26:8-9). But in John it's only Judas. Until this point in the gospel, Judas has not been anywhere close to center stage. After this point, you can't get him out of the spotlight . . . protesting this waste, being called out at the last supper, negotiating with the authorities, turning Jesus in. In this act, with the dramatic and powerful characters of Jesus Himself, the intriguing Mary, the home-building Martha, the dead-now-alive Lazarus . . . with all of these major characters, it is none other than Judas who grabs the spotlight.

He suddenly shows up and protests, and let's be honest, okay? Can we, just here, just completely own our own thoughts? Is he really being unreasonable here? On the lips of anyone else, isn't this the kind of question practical people ask: Is this good stewardship? Aren't we being a bit hasty here? Is there a purpose to this? And it's an ethical question that many of us who are trying to listen to Jesus ask ourselves: Is it right to spend this money on this thing when it could be used to help the poor? That tension runs between building committees and mission committees, between ascetics and cardinals, it's a tension that runs down the middle of most of us. I mean that seems like really good sermon material—why are you wasting your money on stuff that will only last a minute and then dissipate like the fog when it could be used, if you would just give it away, to really help someone? In the case of this story, it's described as that which would feed a poor family for a year, now rolling across the floor, wasted. Pure perfume now mingled with the dirt and grime of the floor. What a waste of a resource.

Haven't you ever been a little sympathetic to this protest? Walk into a big, fancy cathedral somewhere in Europe and find yourself both marveling at the beauty of the gold leaf and ornate marble carvings and also find yourself wondering as you leave blinking back into the sun among the tourists . . . is this what Jesus is all about? Is He really about all of this? What else could have been done with all this money? It's a stewardship question, an ethical question. It's the sort of question that is asked all the time by good-hearted, Jesus-loving people. If you've ever wondered about that sort of thing, you know what it's like to stand, choking in the overpowering perfume of the little house in Bethany. In this case, apparently, to raise the protest puts you on the wrong side of the story.

Judas is brushed off roughly by the narrator, who inserts a bit about how this protest isn't really from Judas' passionate concern for the poor, but out of his own greed. As the keeper of the money for the disciples, he would steal it and use it for himself. So there was a question of motivation. There is always the complex question of our motivations when it comes to religion, worship, money, mission. Why are we doing what we are doing? Why do we hold the position we hold about any issue: economics, health

care, immigration reform, or any of the complex questions of our day. And not only those questions seemingly out there, but questions in here, in our hearts, and in our church.

Tonight you are invited to come together over pots of soup in small group discussion and reflection over the question of mission at DaySpring. I wish I had a really catchy title to give to the evening to try to hook you into coming, but . . . well, whatever. It's a guided small group conversation about mission at DaySpring. We'll begin with reflection and conversation over readings that may help us explore our memories and hopes about mission from different angles. Then we'll talk about potential next steps—how the passions and callings that different people have can grow some legs and walk together. This is a very special city with a lot of hurts and this is a very special church with a lot to offer, and we have a gospel that calls us to love our neighbor, and we want to do that. The only question for many of us is: How? What does that look like? What shape does that take? So we are asking that question for ourselves as individuals and as a whole church. And so tonight is part of a longer process, maybe it could be said that goes back to the beginning of the church, about discerning this aspect of our Christianity.

The last time we met and talked about this together, we just thought through some of the kinds of questions that get raised when we start embarking on 'mission.' They were good questions and we need to keep them at the front of our minds and hearts—not to prevent us from mission—but to help keep mission the mission of Jesus and not our own. One of you asked, or maybe different people in different ways said, that it is important for us to constantly ask ourselves, "What is our motivation? Why do we do what we do?" It's an important query.

Jesus once said, "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8). If we want to see God in anything we do and in who we are, our motivations need to be examined and purified. This is hard work. And it is such hard work that I can end up stuck at this place and end up using the question of motivation as an excuse not to take any steps at all. So we have to be self-reflectively aware of our motivation in how we ask the question about our motivations. See . . . humans are complicated complex beings! Perhaps the best we can do is give all we are and all we do to God in prayer, asking that each step of the way our will is God's will, our ways approximate God's ways, our thoughts reflect God's thoughts, our actions respond to God's prompting, our relationships reflect God's love, our only will, hope, and desire is to be Christlike.

Whatever else might be said about Judas and whatever might be true about the way he handled the money, Judas' motivations were complex and complicated and increasingly mixed up. I don't think we've ever really gotten to the bottom of the man who sold out his friend for a few pieces of silver and then tried to give the silver coins back out of immediate regret. Judas is an enigma.

The narrator brushes off his protest as arising from false motivations. Jesus brushes it off, too, a bit more gently. "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of My burial. The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have Me" (John 12:7-8).

“Leave her alone. You will always have the poor with you.” He says this phrase in a context of the Sabbath day, a practice of alternative economics with the extravagance of Mary’s gift, in the final stages of His life. Here we find the intersection of Sabbath, economics, generosity, along with a concern about such generosity. Each of these, along with “the poor will always be with you” is found in Deuteronomy 15. Jesus is clearly invoking that text here.

The Old Testament Jews didn’t just have a Sabbath every seven days on which they would rest. They had Sabbath years. Every seven years, the land was to lie rest, and, as we see here in this chapter, all debts to one another were to be forgiven. “At the end of every seven years you shall grant a release. And this is the manner of the release: Every creditor shall release what he has lent to his neighbor. He shall not exact it over his neighbor, his brother, because the Lord’s release has been proclaimed” (Deuteronomy 15:1-2). Deuteronomy 15 goes on to say in verse seven, “If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be.” Take care lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart and you say, “The seventh year, the year of release is near, and your eye look grudgingly on your poor brother, and you give him nothing and he cry to the Lord against you, and you be guilty of sin” (Deuteronomy 15:9). According to this, even if it is year six in the cycle, however unlikely it is that you will ever see a return on your lending, you are to give it with a full heart. In fact, if you have a poor brother and he needs the help, the resources you have actually belong to him in God’s eyes, and if you don’t give it, you are stealing from him what God says is his. The foundation of your relationship is not in a financial contract. It is in the covenant you share as the family of brothers and sisters under God.

Verse 11 is Jesus’ quote, “For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, ‘You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.’”

Yes, Judas, your financial arithmetic is right. But your spiritual calculus is wrong. It’s about being the kind of people who are generous with one another no matter the cost, no matter the circumstances. Judas, you are perfectly willing to tell someone else how her generosity is misplaced. But where is your own? In God’s economy, generosity is blessed, excessive adoration is worth a fortune, and death leads to life. Go collect your 30 pieces of silver Judas. While you are at it, collect 300, collect 3000. It doesn’t matter. Your heart is small. And God sees the heart.

If Judas’ motivations were complex, Mary’s were as pure as the perfume. It was not a precalculated act. In her mind it may not have even had the full weight of the symbolism Jesus saw in it—an anointing to His death. Maybe it was just something extravagant someone did who loved Jesus with her whole heart. When is the last time you did something, you gave something spontaneously, profoundly, gratuitously generous?

In this moment we have the strangeness and the beauty mixed together. On the surface, Judas’ dream for the money is beautiful, but underneath it is a very peculiar,

even ugly set of motivations. Mary's act on the surface is very strange—she undid her hair and wiped His feet with it? But underneath the strangeness is a beauty. It's a challenge to understand her actions. It's a gift to witness them.

And in Jesus' eyes, Mary is the heroine of the day. She's the star. Not Judas with his moralistic accounting of utilitarian potential good. Not Lazarus with his remarkable story. Not even Jesus Himself at the eleventh hour of His life.

It's Mary. It's not just Mary's perfume wafting through the house. It's not just Mary's resources, spilled out. It's not just Mary's hair, dangling inappropriately in mixed company, dripping with oil. It's not just Mary's position . . . on her knees in a posture of worship. It's Mary's heart that knew the time.

The Sabbath time is almost here. When all debts will be forgiven. Mary's, Martha's, Lazarus', even Judas'. The poor in spirit, the poor in heart, the poor in faith, the poor in hope, the poor in love . . . will all be forgiven. The time of God's excessive, abundant, reckless Sabbath jubilee is coming to wash us all clean and set us all free.

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