

040322 "Anointed Jesus' Feet: More Love to Thee" John 12:1-8

When I was at grad school there was a running joke among the theology students. As some might know, there are several concentrated majors in theology. For example, biblical theology which divides even further into Old Testament theology and New Testament theology. There are also Christian ethics, pastoral counseling, systematic theology, practical theology and so on. We used to say the biblical guys are the least biblical, ethics majors are the least ethical, counseling students are the most in need of some counseling, and practical theologians have no idea how to put ideas into practice. Funny, don't you think? But there's probably some truth to the punch line.

Isn't it true that it is difficult to act as you speak? The more you talk about something, it presents itself in life, and life will never live up to the abundance of talk, so of course action will pale in comparison. Even if those actions show well in comparison with some other people. How wonderful would it be if we could do as we speak? But this is why we must be weary of what we say and even more careful how we act. The apostle John as said, "Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth." (1 John 3:18)

Today's scripture, John chapter twelve, features Judas of Iscariot, the man who loved to talk about relief but not so great at actually aiding, or caring about the poor. The Jewish tradition mandates every person's obligation towards helping those in need. It is a given that those in need are entitled to such aids. There was no vocabulary to describe relief work in the Old

Testament times and so scholars started to use the work, *tsedaqah* meaning public justice. They believed that helping those in need was an obligation that was part of public justice. And although Judas talked at length about public justice here, his life could not fulfill what he said.

To be clear, there was not a single anointing of Jesus for his burial, but two or even three separate occasions of a woman anointing Jesus. Considering that it was customary at the time to pour oil on guests and treat them well, it is not difficult to understand that there have been a few similar incidents. Matthew and Mark describe it similarly while Luke sends the message that “those who have been forgiven knows how to love.” In today’s passage, John’s version is similar to that of Matthew and Mark while detailing the names of those involved. Let's focus on this story written in the Gospel of John today. This event happened shortly after Jesus had raised Nazareth from his tomb. (Matthew 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9, Luke 7:36-50, John 12:1-8)

Verse 1 said, “Six days before Passover ...” We are told this day was only a few days before Jesus was arrested and crucified on the cross, only a few days before Passover. And on the way to Jerusalem, He had stopped over in Bethany. There was a feast there and as usual Martha was serving away in the kitchen and Nazareth was sitting amongst the guests with Jesus. That’s when this happens:

Mary took about a **pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume**; she poured it on Jesus’ feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

At the time nard was a historically precious rare aromatic plant. Romans and Jews of this period had a tradition of crowning their guests with flowers or pouring expensive perfumes on the bodies of their important guests. Of course, they also used perfumes on the bodies of their dead to delay decay. And Mary broke the alabaster jar full of nard to appreciate how important a guest Jesus was to her. How more precious can a guest be, He had just resurrected her beloved brother from the dead! A whole pint emptied out, the fragrance would have filled the entire household.

But in verse 5 Judas scolded, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" Judas knew immediately what the market price for this jar of Nard would go for. "Girl, I can totally see that it's worth a year's wages why are you throwing it all away!" Great eye, don't you think? The amount that was poured over Jesus totals to about 20,000 to 30,000 dollars today. Not shabby. So, if you look at just the words, Judas surely has a point! Come on Mary, we could've helped a lot of poor people with what you just spilled over. How wonderful would it be to help and aid all those in need with twenty, thirty grand! But our Lord commands, "let her be." While Judas scolded this act as an act of waste, Jesus, who knew of the coming crucifixion, compliments her readiness in preparing for His funeral, and announces this event be remembered.

Verse 6 said, "Judas did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it." Judas' words were not rooted in his love and concern for the poor. In fact, he was dipping into the purse himself, and so he wanted that purse to be fatter. So many people talk with great self-justification but many times those words are married to their own profit.

Talk is not so hard. Get used to the faith, the church, the language comes pretty easy. And when the language is easy, people are roped into believing that they are indeed all that they are saying they are. We must beware, and remain spiritually vigilant. Let us not work for self-justification, but for our love of our Lord.

Judas of Iscariot was one of Jesus' chosen twelve. He was there with Him, working for His will and vision, precious in and of itself! But even an outward service to His work is not all it takes to transform a person. A job has no power to transform. If a person who has absolutely no interest in a life with God and the cross, suddenly decides to be a pastor, does that make his/her life holy? No. He/she might be able to pull it off in the eyes of the people, but faith is not about acting a certain role. Faith is about everyday life with God. Of course, God's grace can sometimes work and transform even in those circumstances, but it is God's grace that does the work, not the job description.

Judas was keeping the books in Jesus and His disciples' great ministry, this is no meager job. But that can't be all. God cares about where our hearts are over the actual labor, that is the takeaway for this morning. If Judas' heart was all about Jesus, with total complete concern for the poor, the scriptures would tell a different story today. Conversely, Mary gave her precious gift with the pure intention to show her love for the Lord.

We sweat and toil through our time on this earth. And we live with the rewards that we earn from the sweat. We put our earnings, our time, and our hearts to the things we each find valuable. That's all fine but the

scripture is asking us today, how much do you love your God? Is God glorified in the time, the stuff, the intentions of our lives? Or are all of the things serving only our own justice, greed, and desire? We must ask ourselves. Because we are each of us all God's stewards.

Let me conclude my sermon after sharing one more story. The hymn we will sing after holy communion is "More Love to Thee, O Christ." The more we know the hymns we sing, the more we will receive grace through the background. "More love to thee, O Christ, more love to thee! Hear thou the prayer I make on bended knee. This is my earnest plea: More love, O Christ, to thee; more love to thee, more love to thee!" Looking at the lyrics alone, it sounds like a confession to thank the Lord and to love the Lord even more in a very blessed environment. However, until this hymn was written, there was Elizabeth Prentiss' beautiful obedience to God in her heartbreaking sorrow. Elizabeth was born in Maine in 1818 and married the Rev. George Prentice at the age of twenty-seven. She was so sickly that she spent a lot of time in bed. But because she was a good writer, she drew attention both as a poet and as a writer.

In the eleventh year of marriage, a dreadful epidemic broke out. This has resulted in the loss of two beloved children. When Elizabeth was unable to overcome the sadness, her husband Pastor George said this: "Honey, many families are mourning the loss of children from the plague. I believe now is the time to put into practice the word of God we have always taught to the people. Our joy and hope is in God. We cannot understand everything, but in times like these, let us have the same faith as Abraham and depend more on God. Children will be with our Lord in a better place." She came to realize again that God loved us until he was humiliated on the cross by sending his

only son, Jesus, to this earth to save sinners. Words could not express the love of Jesus, who suffered all kinds of unbearable sufferings and loved people even to the point of death. Elizabeth wrote poetry inspired by the great love toward the Lord. "This still its prayer shall be: More love, O Christ, to thee; more love to thee, more love to thee!"

Dear beloved sisters and brothers in Christ, do you love the Lord your God? With all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind? This is my earnest plea: we will confess that we love the Lord more in all circumstances and live a life worthy of that confession. Fairfield Grace, may God's grace, peace, goodness, and mercy be with you and your family, and your business, and your studies, and with the lives of your children. Amen.