

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 43:16-21
SECOND LESSON: John 12:1-8
April 3, 2022
FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

“The Right Kind of Extravagance”

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A sophisticated looking young woman walked into an elevator at Nordstrom’s filling the space with the scent of expensive perfume. She bragged about the extravagance to the older woman who stood beside her, “Clive Christian No. 1.” It costs \$2150 per ounce. My boyfriend got it for me in London.

As the elevator reached the second floor the sound of air escaping could be heard and an awful smell filled the space. The older woman turned and smiled sweetly as she got off the elevator saying, “Broccoli, 49 cents a pound.”

The dinner given in Jesus’ honor took place the night before he entered the city on what we call Palm Sunday. Lazarus, Mary and Martha were among Jesus’ closest friends. Lazarus had been raised from the dead by Jesus. Everyone was still talking about it. This family knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that they had been touched by God through Jesus. Words could not begin to express how they felt about him.

But here’s where I have a problem, and I do apologize in advance for messing with your world, but this is one of those times when we have more than one version of the same event, and the versions do not all line up. The people who claim the bible is inerrant have developed a high level of skill in the area of ignoring this. I don’t have a hard time explaining the differences because I accept that one event will be reported differently by different witnesses. And when we add to this the fact that these stories were first remembered and transmitted orally in separate communities, well . . . here’s what we have.

- In John’s gospel the woman is Mary. It is Jesus’ feet that are anointed with a pound of pure nard and dried with her hair. The location is the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus in Bethany. Jesus defended her saying it was for his burial.
- In Mark and Matthew’s gospels the woman is very specifically unnamed. The event takes place in the home of Simon the Leper in Bethany. A woman came to Jesus with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on Jesus’ head as he was reclining at the table. Jesus defended the woman saying it was for his burial. Matthew and Mark are almost identical.

- In Luke's gospel the event takes place in the home of Simon the Pharisee who had invited Jesus to have dinner with him, but neglected to show even the most basic hospitality of foot washing. While Jesus was reclining at table a woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume, stood behind Jesus at his feet weeping and basically washed his feet with her tears, wiped them off with her hair and then poured perfume on them. There is no mention of Jesus' death.

It is this type of discrepancy that gives people ammunition to mock Christians and to attack their faith, because if our faith is only true if every word of the bible is literally accurate, then our faith is built on a house of cards. **But it is not necessary for scripture to be infallible in this way in order for it to be inspired!** Our faith is in God, NOT the bible. The bible was written by human beings who could sometimes get a bit muddled as to the order in which events happened or the exact time and place.

I am willing to assume that the event described in Luke is separate. The situation is very different. The woman in question uncovered her head. She loosened her hair. This was unheard of for any virtuous woman. Only a prostitute would do this. Only a woman whose reputation was so far gone as to be beyond recovery would do this. And the act of foot-washing was for the purpose of care in this case, not preparation for burial.

We are then left with two traditions—that of Matthew and Mark and that of John. I find it highly unlikely that there were two different women in Bethany who poured expensive perfume on Jesus right before his death. I suspect the three traditions, and the name of Simon, got mixed up. John says Mary poured the perfume on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. That detail sounds like it comes from the story found in Luke. But it is very unlikely that a respectable woman like Mary would have taken her hair down and used it to dry Jesus' feet. It also doesn't make sense. The woman in Luke was drying Jesus' feet after washing them with her tears before anointing them. No one wiped the perfume off after putting it on. Mary would have gotten it all over her hair, and that wasn't the point.

Was it Jesus' head or feet that was anointed? We don't know. Anointing Jesus' head made sense for a king or a priest. Anointing the feet made sense for hospitality or burial. Bodies were normally anointed feet first. And feet were more accessible. Guests would lounge around a table like spokes in a wheel, with feet facing out. Everyone was positioned at right angles to the table. Servants would then come and sit on the floor at the end of the couch before each guest and wash feet. Washing feet was the job of a slave, but it was such a lowly job Jewish slaves were not required to do it. After the feet were washed, they were then typically rubbed with oil—olive oil or something more fragrant.

For all that is different in these accounts, there is a core that is the same, and that is what is important here. The perfume was very expensive. It was a *litran*, about 12 ounces. It cost a year's wages for the average worker. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus bought one hundred *litrans* of myrrh and aloes for Jesus' burial, enough for a king. Mary did not have that kind of money, and using the entire jar was an act of incredible extravagance. In

Matthew, Mark and John those there at the time objected strenuously to the wastefulness. John's gospel highlights Judas, and questions his motives. In all of the Bethany stories Jesus defended the woman as having done a beautiful thing, preparing his body for burial. Mary, of course, had no intention of anointing Jesus for burial. She would have understood he was in danger, but nowhere does it appear that she knew he had less than a week to live. But when she anointed Jesus she was acting under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

Acts of extravagance can often be judged harshly. I remember a young missionary couple I once knew who lived in Leith, a poor neighborhood near the docks in Edinburgh. The couple lived in an apartment attached to a Baptist church in exchange for cleaning the building. They had almost nothing and depended upon the support of individuals. One day they had invited one of their donors for dinner, an older woman who gave them money every month. One of the few extravagances they had, if you can call it that, was that they paid a few pence more and got real butter as opposed to margarine. When the woman was seated at table and eating with them she discovered the real butter. She was indignant. "What?!" she said. "Real butter? If you're going to waste my money like this, I'm not going to support you any longer." She left, and she didn't.

As individuals and as churches we have a responsibility to good stewardship of our resources, but this is not the same thing as judgmental stinginess. And it's always hard to balance this. On the surface those who objected to Mary's extravagant act were right. It was a lot of money to blow at one time, although Judas' reasoning actually had more to do with lining his own pocket than helping the poor. God does want us to be responsible, but not narrow. Our God has all the resources in the universe. God wants us to be generous with one another and with God. And if there is a times when the Holy Spirit nudges us and says, "Give it all" there will always a reason. Mary didn't know why she felt compelled to do what she did, but God did. Amen.

Isaiah 43:16-21

¹⁶ This is what the Lord says—

he who made a way through the sea,
a path through the mighty waters,

¹⁷ who drew out the chariots and horses,
the army and reinforcements together,
and they lay there, never to rise again,
extinguished, snuffed out like a wick:

¹⁸ "Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.

¹⁹ See, I am doing a new thing!

Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?

I am making a way in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland.

²⁰ The wild animals honor me,
the jackals and the owls,
because I provide water in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland,
to give drink to my people, my chosen,
²¹ the people I formed for myself
that they may proclaim my praise.

John 12:1-8

¹² Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ² Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. ³ Then 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.

⁴ But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, ⁵ "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." ⁶ He 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.

⁷ "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. ⁸ You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."