

Mary of Bethany:
The Many Ways of Being a Disciple of Jesus
By Pastor Wes Smith

Text: John 12:1-8 (NRSV)

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus's feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (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.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Good Evening Folks. Will you pray with me, please? *Holy God, how shall we give thanks to you for the love which envelops our lives every day? Not only is the earth full of your glory, our lives are blessed beyond measure with the extravagance of your love and goodness. Help us now by your Spirit, to learn from Mary of Bethany to love you beyond compare and to pour out our lives in love for you even as you poured out your life for us. We ask this with great expectation, for we ask it in the strong name of Jesus. Amen.*

Thank you for joining me tonight as we conclude our Midwinter exploration of faith, hope and love from the pages of the Bible to our own lives of ministry and discipleship. Tonight our focus on love leads us to Mary of Bethany. Her act of spilling a bottle of hugely expensive perfume all over Jesus is one of the best known stories about Jesus, maybe one of the best known in all the Bible.

In fact, I would go so far – well, never mind me, Jesus would go so far as to say — that Mary's expression of love may well be the single most expressive act of love recorded by any person in the Gospels. If you're wondering where Jesus exactly says this, well, he says it in a couple of different ways, and we'll start with something Jesus says in Mark's alternate account of the story. My real interest tonight with Mary is in John's Gospel, but let's note two things that Jesus says in Mark's account. First, in the NIV's rendering, Jesus silences Mary's critics by saying *she has done a beautiful thing to me*. That description — she has done a beautiful thing to me — is something he does not say of any other act he receives from another human. And second, and even more significantly, Jesus says that what Mary did will be told *in remembrance of her*. That's a big deal, but we're going to save that for a little later.

There is a third thing that highlights Mary's act of love which is revealed in both Mark and John, and that is the way Mary's act of love is contrasted with Judas' act of betrayal. The ultimate betrayal is counter-balanced by the ultimate demonstration of love. In case you're wondering, that also explains why Mark positions Mary's story two days before the Passover (Jesus' death) and John six days before the Passover. It's not that one or the other was inaccurate or incorrect, but that Mark is fond a writing technique called sandwiching (the technical word is intercalation, but sandwich sounds much yummier) whereby he takes one theme and surrounds it with two commentaries, sort for like two pieces of bread surrounding a piece of meat. And we won't get into whether hotdogs are sandwiches, even though they do fit the Markan definition — the important point is that John gives us the more strictly chronological account but Mark wishes to give a greater contrast with Judas' betrayal and so he puts Mary's anointing on the very day of Judas' betrayal, giving it an even more theological twist, if you will. But in their own way, each author contrasts Mary with Judas.

Okay. That's the stuff going on around Mary and her act of love. But what is it that makes this act of Mary's such a beautifully extravagant act of love? Well, we all know that the perfume she poured on Jesus was expensive. And it was. Three hundred denarii was about the average yearly income of a day laborer. But we miss the point if we get caught up trying to compare wages and COLA between now and two thousand years ago; it actually disguises the outrage over how much is being wasted. Put it this way: however you define what it is you need to get by on for an entire year is all wasted, whether it's 15,000, 50,000, or 150,000. Or think of a church budget for a year! Whatever this sum is, it constitutes your entire life: everything you need in life, everything you need to get by on, everything you need to exist is being poured down the drain. It's not a dollar amount, and it's not a specific quantity: it's everything. Mary pours out everything.

In purely literal terms, Mary pours out the whole jar of perfume, not just a portion of it. Incidentally, that's why Mary has to wipe Jesus' feet with her hair: there was so much perfume that it created a huge puddle on the floor, and since there was no *Bounty* quicker-picker-upper available, she used her own hair to dry his feet and the puddle beneath his feet because she had poured out everything.

But there is an even deeper illustration of how much of an EVERYTHING Mary's act really is. This story in John 12 takes place on the eve of Palm Sunday. And it is no accident that this reading from John 12 in Year C is the Gospel for the Sunday that precedes Palm Sunday. In other words, this story is an integral part, from John's point of view, of Holy Week. Holy Week, the week that our Lord goes to the cross. And what does he do on that cross? As I remember the story, anyway, Jesus gives... everything.

Jesus defines love on that cross by giving everything so that we might live. This is where Jesus' words in Mark's Gospel find their true significance: what Mary has done will be told *in remembrance of her*. That specific wording in the passive voice (isn't grammar great?) about something done in remembrance occurs one and only one other time in the Gospels. And here's a hint: it, too, happens during Holy Week. It happens at the supper where Jesus, in describing his own death on the cross for our sake, asks us to celebrate the meal of his death *in remembrance of him*.

By choosing those exact words and grammatical phrasing only a few days after he used that expression for Mary's act of love, Jesus is saying that no other act during his ministry compared with Mary's in mirroring his own act of love on the cross. When it comes to love, Mary's got it down pat.

There is still another dimension to her love. But first, we have to ask at some point why? Why does Mary give everything? Why does she extend such incredible love? So I need to tell you a little story. Back in 1841 or so, Verdi wrote an opera called *Nabucco* (which is short for Nebuchadnezzar) about the Hebrews living in exile in Babylon, and at one point the Hebrews sing a chorus based on Psalm 139 about their longing to be back in Jerusalem, their true homeland. When this chorus was sung at its premiere all the people in the opera house went nuts and ran out into the streets singing the chorus over and over and in some ways precipitated the revolution that led to the unification of Italy. This chorus even became the unofficial national anthem of Italy. So, why? Why did that chorus precipitate such a reaction? Because the chorus met the fundamental need of that people in that time; it spoke to and for what they really desired, a safe homeland to call their own. And in a very similar way, Mary's act of love was precipitated by an act of Jesus that met her ultimate need. The need for newness of life when she saw Jesus bring back her brother from the dead.

As St John writes elsewhere, we love because God first loved us. That's what makes the timing of Mary's act so important. Not only does this supper in John 12 take place on the cusp of Palm Sunday, it takes place immediately after Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. In fact, that's the reason for the meal: it's a celebration of new life and therefore it is a foretaste of the feast to come. Of all the people who get indignant at Mary's act, who is the one person who does not get upset? Her brother Lazarus. Why? Because he experienced first-hand what it means to receive newness of life from Jesus. And was it not Mary, along with her sister, who heard the words of Jesus just before her brother was raised that Jesus is the resurrection and the life? Mary knows this. And so Mary returns the love of Christ in her own act of love.

But wait! There's more to this story about Mary and love and the meal she, her sister and brother offer Jesus. And it has to do with being a disciple and the way that loving Jesus and being a disciple of Jesus go hand in hand. There is a very good case to be made that Mary of Bethany, and other women too, were considered by Jesus to be disciples. It goes like this.

The first thing to note is that the Gospels do not use the word disciple synonymously with The Twelve. When the Gospel writers mean The Twelve, they usually say so just that way. The word disciple is always used more broadly by the Gospel writers for those who follow Jesus, even if they are not one of The Twelve. Sometimes the word is used for The Twelve, but quite often the word disciple is used to describe a whole variety of people who were followers of Jesus. It's clear that there were other disciples besides The Twelve, most notably in John's Gospel the Beloved Disciple.

More significantly, neither Hebrew nor Aramaic in Jesus' day had a feminine form of the word disciple. The word disciple existed in the languages Jesus spoke only in a masculine form. So even if Jesus had wanted to call a woman a disciple, the language did not exist for him to do so. But there is a larger point to be made here, which is that *new realities emerge on the historical scene before there are new words to describe them, and sometimes there is a lag between the new reality and the new coinage*. (This last sentence and the material here generally about the different levels of being a disciple comes from John Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, volume III, 79).

It's probably best to say that there were different groups or levels of disciples associated with Jesus. So, what was the reality of Jesus and his group, or groups, of disciples? The most important, obviously, is the The Twelve. But because Jesus and The Twelve had an itinerant ministry, they had to depend on other people to house, feed, and provide for them. Remember, when Jesus started his ministry up in Galilee the requirement for The Twelve is that they had to leave their families and their homes – that wasn't just hyperbole or metaphor, it was real, something Peter pointedly reminds Jesus of.

So for nearly three years Jesus has to depend on the support of others. Luke is most famous among the Gospels for highlighting how women did this for Jesus, but all four Gospels actually make this clear. Beyond the first ring of The Twelve who followed Jesus in a literal, itinerant manner, there was another ring of disciples which included Lazarus and Martha, Simon the Leper, Zacchaeus, and the anonymous person who lent their house to Jesus during Holy Week where various disciples stayed throughout the fifty days of Easter and were still in that house on Pentecost. All these people fulfilled their discipleship in acts of love such as providing money, housing and food.

Let's also remember that in John's Gospel, the highest Christological affirmation about Jesus in the entire Gospel comes not from Peter or one other 12 but from Martha, the sister of Mary, who proclaims *You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God*. And if that's not good enough, there is another Mary in John's Gospel who not only serves as a disciple but as a model of the faithful, obedient church. Although John never calls her Mary, he calls her The Mother of the Lord. Clearly, in John's Gospel at least, but also in Luke-Acts, women fulfill all the different aspects of being a disciple of Jesus.

But the point here is not the title of disciple, but the way that love and discipleship go hand in hand. So much so that they define each other. Love defines how a disciple of Jesus Christ acts, and a disciple of Jesus Christ is someone who mirrors the love that Jesus displayed for all people on the cross. And it is Mary of Bethany who, better than anyone else, shows us what love and discipleship are, and who fulfills the words of Isaac Watts' hymn, *love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all*. Amen.