

John 12:1-8 Mary Anoints Jesus

¹Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ²There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" ⁶(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.) ⁷Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

What's Wrong with Judas?

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Text: *John 12:1-8*

Yogi Berra is famous for sayings that sound a bit ridiculous, but that nonetheless get their point across. In a familiar situation Yogi said, "This is like *deja vu* all over again." Advising people about getting directions straight, Yogi said, "If you don't know where you are going, you will wind up somewhere else." Describing the cerebral aspects of baseball, Yogi said, "Baseball is 90% mental, the other half is physical." And when he was asked about all these sayings he was always making, he said, "Ah shucks, I never said half the things I said."

I get something of the same impression about the reputation of Judas Iscariot in this morning's text. I'm not sure Judas did half the things he did. In this morning's text Judas objects when Mary pours expensive perfume on Jesus' feet. He says, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" Three hundred denarii, that's a lot of money. It was roughly a year's wages. In today's dollars it would be like pouring out, what, \$40,000 on Jesus' feet and all over the ground. And Judas asked, why not sell it and give the money to the poor. But in parentheses the text then says, "(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.)" It's not at all clear that Judas was a thief. This idea seems to be an added bit of editorializing. It seems to be added to discredit Judas.

And why did the writer of John want to discredit Judas? Could it have possibly been that Judas's question actually made a lot of sense? Could it have been that it was a good question? Jesus, after all, cared for the poor and healed the sick. Doesn't it seem realistic for one of his followers to object to the wasteful extravagance of pouring thousands of dollars of perfume onto the Jesus' feet and the onto the ground?

Imagine for a moment, if you will, that while she was still alive you have been invited to a dinner party for Mother Theresa. It is a party in honor of all her wonderful and compassionate work for the poor and the sick in the streets of Calcutta. It has not been easy work. It's dirty and smelly and dangerous work. And its bone-crushingly tiring, for the poor and the sick are in endless supply. There are never enough resources to do all that needs to be done. But because Mother Theresa has hung in there, even in this hard and depressing situation, there is a small dinner party to honor her. And one of the guests brings a special gift. It's a bottle of wine for the dinner, Lafite Rothschild 1865, which costs \$8,750. Wouldn't that be outrageous? Wouldn't it be an embarrassment? Who in their right mind would think that a bottle of one of the world's most expensive wines was appropriate for a dinner with Mother Theresa? Who of us wouldn't object that the money could better be spent on the people Mother Theresa spent a lifetime serving, better spent on medicine, for example?

No, I don't think Judas did some of the things he did, or in more sensible English, I'm not all sure Judas was the thief that the Gospel of John accuses him of being. My guess is that the Gospel writer thought that Judas's question had too much truth to it, and he wanted to discredit

the disciple. Judas, who would later betray Jesus, was easy enough to discredit, and discrediting Judas meant that his question did not have to be taken seriously. “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” Is there really anything wrong with Judas and his objection? Or was it what everyone at the party was thinking?

It’s a shame to slander Judas in this story. It’s a shame because the more interesting questions come if we take his question seriously. “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” Why was it alright for Mary to make this extravagant, wasteful gesture? Why, indeed?

One explanation seems to be that Mary brought the perfume to anoint Jesus’ body for burial. In that sense the story reminds us that the end is coming near. In the previous chapter Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, and the authorities began making plans to kill him. In the very next paragraphs from our story this morning, right after Mary anoints Jesus feet with perfume, we have the story of Palm Sunday and Jesus’ fateful entry into Jerusalem. The end, Jesus’ death is not far away now. And so when Mary anointed Jesus with the perfume, she was reminding everyone that his death and burial was coming soon.

Another aspect seems to be the parallel between this story and a story in the very next chapter. In the very next chapter Jesus and his followers are in Jerusalem, just days before his death. When they are celebrating the Passover Feast, Jesus anoints or washes his disciples’ feet. Jesus tells his disciples that he does this because he loves them so much. He washes their feet to show them his love and to show that even though he is Jesus, he serves in the most humble way those whom he loves. This is instruction for his disciples. For soon Jesus will be gone, and they are soon to be the church, and Jesus wants to make it clear that they are to serve others with the same love and humility that he served them.

In reenactment of this scene, many modern day churches hold foot washing ceremonies on Maundy Thursday. As an old New England Congregationalist, this has always seemed a little too personal or intimate to me. But that’s probably the point. I don’t know. Maybe we should do foot washing one Maundy Thursday. Why don’t you let me know what you think about the idea? Who knows, but my guess is that it would be a very moving and meaningful service. Tell me what you think.

All of these are important features of the story. But it doesn’t seem to me that we have yet gotten to the bottom of it. It doesn’t seem to me that we have yet gotten an answer to Judas’ question, why wasn’t it better to spend the huge sum of money on the poor rather than on perfume poured on Jesus’ feet and the ground?

Jesus’ own answer to the question is not very clear, either. He says, “You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.” On the surface this would seem a rather cavalier and out of character response for Jesus. Does he mean, hey, I’m more important with the poor? Or does he mean, look, the poor never will pull themselves up by their bootstraps; they’ll always be there; don’t worry about them? It turns out that there have been Christians who have thought this passage means exactly that. They have said that, in the end, Jesus is telling us that we don’t have to worry about the poor; we don’t have to worry about justice; we just have to worry about him. These particular Christians say that the whole thing is about believing in Jesus as Lord and Savior, and that after that nothing else is important at all.

But it takes a pretty strange reading of the stories of Jesus to come to this conclusion. The Gospels could hardly be clearer about Jesus’ commitment to the poor, the sick and the

dispossessed. It is almost unimaginable that Jesus would teach his followers that these same people should be of no concern to them. Indeed, there is an abundance of stories in which Jesus quite clearly commands his followers to follow in his footsteps, to feed his sheep, to feed his lambs.

Let me tell you an amusing story. As many of you know, I am in charge of the field education program at Harvard Divinity School. In that role, I get to work with over 200 pastors and chaplains and people who work in homeless shelters and in hospices and in prisons. One day a few years ago one of the fundraising groups at the school asked if they could meet with some of these supervisors in the field education program. It turns out that they really wanted to meet the supervisors, but they were also more than a little apprehensive. This group of well-off donors wanted to be interested in hearing my supervisors talk about their work, indeed, they were interested, but they, the donors, were also frightened by the prospect of interacting with this group of supervisors who would no doubt be a grim bunch, worn out by the endless work with problems that never seemed to get solved, worn out by the constant sacrifice, worn out by the very humorlessness of their work. The donors confessed to me that they wanted to talk with the supervisors, but that they weren't really looking forward to it.

But what the donors found was quite different from what they expected. Instead of a grim and burned-out bunch, what they encountered was a group of supervisors who were full of humor and gladness, even though it was quite true that the work they did was tough and serious.

It was a real eye-opener for many of the donors. Some of them were utterly mystified. And they asked me in private how it was possible. How is it possible, they asked, that these people can minister in the most difficult situations in society and be so upbeat and lively? Some of the donors surmised that if they had to work in the prisons or in social services or with the homeless and the sick and the dying they would simply be crushed under the weight of the harsh and depressing realities. How, they wondered, could these supervisors not just survive but actually seem to thrive in these conditions?

"You do not always have me," said Jesus. Maybe Jesus means something in addition to the fact that he is soon to suffer and die. Throughout his ministry Jesus interacted with people who did not fully grasp his meaning. Politicians and religious authorities protected their turf, and they didn't want anyone rocking the boat. And so even religious laws had devolved into hollow conventions—don't heal on the Sabbath; don't raise Lazarus from the dead; don't do things that will make anyone uncomfortable, even though the things Jesus did meant he lived out the very core of his religious faith. And even Jesus' own disciples often wanted the wrong things from him. They didn't want him to die in humiliation. They wanted a winner. And in a sense Jesus said to them all, that even as he was alive, they did not really have him with them. That is, they did not connect with Jesus' deepest self, Jesus' deepest message. They were seduced by the wiles of the world. And Jesus knew two things about being seduced by the wiles of the world. First, it is very difficult to keep your motivations pure when you are seduced by the wiles of the world. When worldly temptations and gain are at the top of your list in life, it is difficult to also be committed to compassion and ethical behavior. They are too often in conflict. In that light, maybe Judas wasn't as committed to the poor as his question wanted to suggest. Maybe it was a ruse to cover his political or selfish intentions.

But Jesus knew another thing about being seduced by the wiles of the world. He knew that the wiles of the world tended to separate one from a relationship with God, or a relationship

with Jesus. “You do not always have me,” then has another and profound meaning. Even as Jesus followers sat in the room at the dinner party, they did not fully have him. Judas didn’t have him. The authorities who sought to do him in didn’t have him.

And Jesus knew that a relationship with God is the only thing that can inspire us to see beyond ourselves, to transcend the worldly temptations, and it is the only thing that can constantly energize us to gladness in the midst of life, life that always has the poor and any number of other intractable troubles.

Now I’m not sure pouring out thousands of dollars of perfume onto the ground is a great idea as a habit, but I am sure that when Mary did it, she was illustrating the great gratitude and love that she had for her relationship with Jesus. It was a moment of teaching. Jesus knew that Mary’s deep connection with him and with God would fuel her gladness in all of life and it would fuel her energy for a life of service. And Jesus knew that without this connection and love, there would be no real gladness, and the commitment to service would inevitably flag.

Jesus calls us to a loving relationship with him, that we might always have him with us, and that we might take up our yoke with gladness. The only thing wrong with Judas was that he missed the point. Amen.

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