



Sermon Synopsis – Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 21, 2010
Preached by Deacon in Training Patricia Pearson

John's story of the anointing of Jesus differs from the stories in Matthew, Mark and Luke. In the other gospels, the characters in the story are unnamed and generalized. In the other gospels, Jesus is anointed by "a woman...with an alabaster jar of...ointment", and criticized by the "disciples" (in Matthew), or the "Pharisee" (in Luke), or simply "some" people (in Mark). In John, the characters are named. Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, is the one with the perfume. And Mary is rebuked, not by a "disciple", or the "Pharisee", or "some" people: rather, in John's gospel Mary is rebuked by Judas Iscariot, the disciple who is going to betray Jesus.

The story we heard on the fifth Sunday of Lent is a drama between two characters, Mary and Judas; two of Jesus' closest friends. These two people were among the small group of people who knew Jesus the best, and had the most at stake in his future.

I think it is helpful to understand the historical context in which this story takes place. In the previous chapter of John, we find the story of Jesus raising Mary and Martha's brother, Lazarus, from the dead. At the time of this story, people are making the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Passover. Jesus has been traveling, preaching, and healing, and has a growing following. The religious authorities are on alert, afraid that the Romans will destroy the Temple and the nation, because of the problems Jesus is creating. The authorities want to know where Jesus is so that they can arrest him. And as all these circumstances are coming together, Jesus returns to Bethany, a walking distance from Jerusalem.

Jesus returns to Bethany. It is six days before the Passover. He comes to the home of his friends Lazarus, Mary and Martha, who are giving a dinner in his honor. The only other named guest is Judas Iscariot; whoever else is there is unnamed. We are told that, while Martha served the meal, Mary...

...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. 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 denari and the money given to the poor?"

This is one of the gospel stories that impress me with its utter extravagance. Too understand that extravagance, we have to answer a couple of questions. What exactly is a pound of nard? And what does it mean that it could have been sold for three hundred denari?

This jar (*referring to a jar that was used in the sermon*) is a proxy for the alabaster jar of ointment referenced in Matthew. This jar holds a pound of liquid, representative of the pound of pure nard Mary used to anoint Jesus' feet. When I think about how much body moisturizer I use after a shower, and then think

about the amount of ointment this jar would hold, I'm impressed. I invite you to come up later and hold this jar to get a sense of just how much nard Mary used to anoint Jesus.

Nard is a hardy herb that grows in the foothills of the Himalayas. The part of the plant that grows underground is rich in the precious oil that was traded out of India, through Persia. Nard is described as having "*intense, warm, fragrant, musky notes, similar to the aromas of humus.*" I wonder, if this jar was filled with nard and broken open, how the fragrance would fill this space.

Judas said that Mary's pound of nard could have been sold for three hundred denari. Three hundred denari would have been the equivalent of nearly a year's wages for a laborer. At this time of year, many of us are working on our annual income tax returns. Think about what a year's wages means to you; what it took to earn those wages, and the choices you make in spending those wages. Imagine that the content of this jar is worth all your wages earned in the past year. And then, imagine breaking this jar open, and anointing Jesus' feet with its contents.

I've spent a lot of time thinking about today's gospel reading, and my personal response to the extravagance of Mary's actions - to her anointing Jesus' feet with a pound of precious nard, and using her hair to rub the ointment over Jesus' feet. I'll be honest with you. If I was a guest at this dinner - there with Jesus, Lazarus, Martha, Mary, Judas and the others - I would probably be shocked by, and disapproving of Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet with the precious nard. Like Judas, this deacon-in-training would probably challenge the extravagance of the anointing in the face of the needs of the poor. And there are a lot of reasons for that.

I am a child of parents who grew up during the depression. Both of my parents' families struggled financially during the depression, and for years afterwards.

In contrast, my parents achieved financial security during their lifetimes. And though I grew up in financial security, my upbringing was influenced by my parents' experiences during the depression. Waste not, want not was a mantra I heard often as a child. Family meals were planned to feed everyone at the table - without leftovers. We were considered to have lived below our means. I was taught that it was unseemly and in poor taste to show off our wealth. My parent's saved to pay for their children's college educations and their own retirement, and extra money was given to charities and the church. As a child, I had my own box of pledge envelopes, and was taught to give something to the church each week. We recycled, not from a sense of stewardship of creation, but from a waste not, want not attitude toward the use of resources.

I see this story of Mary anointing Jesus through the lens of my experience, including the lessons I learned from my parents about relationship to money and resources. I'll be honest with you: I have a difficult time seeing myself taking this jar, the contents worth a year's wages, breaking it open, and pouring the contents over the feet of Jesus.

My mind would be processing and calculating:

- How much nard would I have to use to *lightly* anoint Jesus' feet and *pleasantly* perfume the room, and how could I preserve the rest?

- Hmm, Judas has a point about selling this stuff. I wonder how much money I could raise by selling it? I could give some of the money to St. John's, some to St. Timothy's, some to MOMS, some to the food bank, some to that homeless woman who is always hanging around the grocery store, and I could put the rest aside for the poor, who are always with us.
- Think about this Patricia. Maybe this isn't the right time to use the nard. After all, I procured it to have ready for Jesus' burial. That time has not arrived. Maybe I should save it.

What does it say about me that I would hesitate to make such an extravagant, over-the-top gesture of love to Jesus? What does it say about my priorities and my relationship with Jesus? These are good questions for me to take to my spiritual direction group.

In this story, Jesus tells Judas to leave Mary alone - that she bought the perfume to have it ready for the day of his burial. Nard was used for the anointing of the dead, and anointing was the last step before burial. But executed criminals were not anointed. Because we know how the story ends, we know that Jesus is going to die in just a few days - a criminal executed by the state.

Mary's act is an extravagant display of spontaneous love for Jesus, played out against the drama of the upcoming betrayal by Judas, and finally to Jesus' death on the cross.

I'd like to end with a prayer.

Lord, help us today to love you

with the same extravagance demonstrated by Mary.

Help us to recognize that there is no economy
in holding back our love for you and for one another.

Help us to know that no love is wasted;

that sharing love today does not diminish love tomorrow.

Help us to be with Mary,

sharing in the anointing of the man

who will not be with us much longer.

And by our anointing Jesus with the precious nard,

help us to mourn in advance our own cries of "Crucify him!" next Sunday.

Amen.