

Sermon on John 12:1-8
Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 21, 2010
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ....

This morning's gospel lesson is a preview of the events of Holy Week, coming soon to our parish - from the evening before Palm Sunday, which would result less than a week later in the betrayal and crucifixion of our Lord Jesus. But the focus of this passage is not a conversation, a teaching, an action or a miracle. The focus is the smell of rare and precious perfume, which filled the room of the home where Jesus and company were eating that night in Bethany, about six miles from the Holy City of Jerusalem. That aroma immediately attracted everyone's attention, for it was a sweetness that no one could ignore.

There was tension that night, but it wasn't only about nard. Jesus gathered that night with his disciples at the home of his best friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Once again, Martha was serving in the kitchen, and Mary was sitting at Jesus' feet. Jesus was about to make his last and final visit to Jerusalem, the center of faith for his people. He knew that he had enemies outside of the room, and there was a traitor in their midst. His raising of Lazarus from the dead had made a lot of enemies for Jesus among the Pharisees, priests and scribes. They were plotting his death as Jesus and his disciples ate their dinner, and they planned to arrest Lazarus as well. For by raising Lazarus from the grave, Jesus had challenged the authority of the priests of the Temple, and now the people who had heard this glorious news were turning to Jesus as their savior. He was becoming known as the long-awaited Messiah, and the priests couldn't have that! Jesus was now a threat to their authority and position, and his challenges were too direct. So they began to plot his arrest so that they could eliminate him as a threat, and Jesus knew it. He was troubled; his disciples could sense it.

But before Jesus would make his final public appearance in Jerusalem, he gathered with his friends and disciples at Lazarus, Mary, and Martha's home for dinner. It was a last meal with those who loved him most. But right after dinner, Mary did an amazing thing: she took a pound of nard, this costly perfume, knelt at Jesus feet, took down her hair, and anointed his feet with perfume, wiping it clean with her hair. It was a stunning act, and the sweet smell filled the house.

So what is nard? It was this expensive, imported perfume, which comes from the root of a plant grown in the high mountains of Nepal. It was hard to get, it was rare, and traders traveled a long trade route - 2,500 miles! - to bring it from the Himalayas to Jerusalem, to a market where Mary and Martha would have purchased it. So it wasn't something they would have purchased every week! It

was meant only for the anointing of a body for burial, to cover the stench of death with the sweet aroma of perfume and spices. They would have purchased it for their brother Lazarus, who, you remember, had recently died and been buried in his tomb for three days before Jesus had raised him from the dead. They had not used all of the nard, and had plenty left over it seems, for Mary to anoint Jesus' feet after dinner that night in their home.

Why had she done this? First of all, remember that Jesus, their family's closest and dearest friend as well as their teacher, was an honored guest. But Mary wanted to do more than just wash his feet with water, which would be the customary act of hospitality. For he had brought their brother back to life, after all! So Mary took the sweet-smelling, expensive nard that they had begun to use to anoint their deceased brother Lazarus, to now anoint the feet of their Lord, Jesus. What else could she have done to show her gratitude? Perhaps she didn't really know the suffering and death that Jesus was soon to experience in Jerusalem, how could she have known. Anointing his feet with the perfume that was used to anoint the dead was perhaps an ironic foreshadowing of his coming death. But to Mary, it was simply an act of gratitude, honoring the friend, her brother, whom Jesus had saved from the grave. Her tears were tears of gratitude and love, mixed perhaps with her fears for what Jesus might soon face in Jerusalem.

Of course, this was all a surprise to Jesus' disciples, and shocking. After all, who would anoint a person's feet with such expensive perfume? It filled the whole room with a strong, sweet aroma, which nobody could ignore. Maybe the disciples were shocked. No one had ever seen or heard of someone doing this before. John says that Judas Iscariot was critical of Mary's action, saying how much money she could have sold this perfume for, and given it to the poor. But John says that it wasn't because Judas cared so much for the poor as he disapproved of Mary. John hinted that Judas was a thief, and kept some of the disciples' common finances for himself. Be that as it may, Judas certainly was critical of Mary, and reprimanded her, but Jesus would have none of it. "Leave her alone," Jesus said. "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."

Now this is what we have commonly misinterpreted in the Church. Many have heard this as permission from Jesus to ignore the poverty around us ("the poor will always be with you"). But from everything we know about Jesus and have heard him say does not support letting the poor suffer without justice. The Church cannot be silent, just as Jesus was never silent. We dare not be so eager to let ourselves "off the hook" as witnesses to the suffering of people around us. For the criticism of Judas is not a criticism of the poor or a negation of the importance of responding to their poverty. It is a rebuttal to Judas's hypocrisy, his phony and self-righteous attempt to belittle Mary for her act of devotion, couched in fake

concern for the poor. Or, maybe Judas just was mistaken, or misread the situation, because he didn't "get" the symbolism of Jesus being anointed for burial by his friend. To Judas, this was a simple waste of resources, and actually, he was right, by normal biblical standards. 300 *denarii* was a year's wages, so it *was* very extravagant! Hadn't the prophets themselves said that God doesn't want our burnt offerings, but instead desires the faithful to *do justice*? Jesus himself had reinforced this idea with his own teachings, facing the Pharisees and other religious authorities for their own hypocrisies, following the letter of the law instead of its spirit, requiring obedience to religious traditions instead of having true compassion for the poor. Judas and the other disciples had been so impressed with this teaching that it had become ingrained in their thinking, and now they were confused by Mary's lavish act of devotion (dare I say, "prodigal" act of love – as prodigal means "lavish" or extravagant). Judas was probably stunned by Jesus' gentle rebuke of his criticism of Mary. Maybe he was embarrassed, maybe he was angry as well, and thought again about the bargain he was going to make with the Temple priests to turn Jesus in....Because it just didn't make sense to let Mary spend so much money on a frivolous act of devotion, when changing the world by bringing in God's kingdom was supposed to be the order of the day. What was Jesus thinking? Had he begun to believe the adulation of the people? So Judas's question could be ours, for this Jesus seems out of character speaking so flippantly about the poor.

On the other hand, this passage isn't primarily about Judas, who had misunderstood. It's about Mary, and her grateful act of love and devotion for the person who had brought her brother back from the dead. How could Mary repay Jesus for that? She couldn't! So she did the only thing that she could: she took the most expensive thing she had, this costly perfume saved for her brother's body – which now was alive and didn't need anointing – and bathed Jesus' feet with it.

But in the end, this passage isn't just about Mary's devotion to Jesus and Judas's reaction. This passage also is about *us*. How you and I can show our devotion to Jesus, both in acts of devotion to our Lord in worship and deeds of love and justice for our neighbor? For how can you and I show our loving gratitude to the one who has loved us so much that he gave his very life, so that we would have life?! How can we show even a portion of the gratitude we should have? Could we pour gallons of our most expensive perfume on Jesus' feet? Would that be anywhere near what is owed? Or what if we gave over all our possessions – our homes, our livelihood – would that even come close? But without love, even that would be like a clanging gong or a clashing cymbal, all noise, without substance. For what does God ask of us anyway? What does the greatest commandment say? *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and*

your neighbor as yourself. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.

It seems that we are only capable of one or the other – loving God *or* loving your neighbor, showing devotion *or* doing justice! We may leave our devotion in worship, and forget what we have been called to do in the world outside the walls of the church. Or we may look down on those who leave their worship at the altar because of the hypocrisy of the church in neglecting the poor, and so neglect our own calling to worship and prayer...but in the end we find this was just an excuse, because left to our selves, few of us really care about the poor. This was the failing of Judas, after all! But how can God really call us to do both?

Because one flows out of the other: we love because God first loved us; we love our neighbor because Christ calls us to in scripture and in worship. Because our true worship is when we take our devotion to Christ out into the world and extend it to our neighbor, with love and compassion. So we do not disregard the poor by honoring God in our worship. For there is a time and a place for everything: a time to worship and a time to do justice, a time to breathe in and a time to breathe out, a time to pray and a time to listen to our neighbor, a time to praise God and a time to bear witness to God's compassion in our world.

Over the past weeks we have been invited to embark on a 40 day journey of the soul during Lent, a time for prayer, fasting, and multiple opportunities for worship. But as we pray and hear God's Word, we do not close our eyes to the needs of the world – in fact, we become more aware of our neighbor's need because scripture and our Lord require it! And as we enter into Holy Week and its many worship services in a short period of time, we are not separated from the world and its pain – we are invited to understand it more deeply, and see God's answer to injustice, betrayal and death in the person of God's Son. Jesus himself shows us most clearly how you and I can honor God with obedience and devotion while at the same time challenging evil and showing compassion for those who suffer. So God invites us to put our whole hearts into worship out of gratitude for the gift of His Son, and the life we have been given, and to let this spirit lead us into a lifetime of compassion and deeds of love for our neighbor. And so may God's will be done in our lives, as we follow the example of our Lord Jesus Christ.