

**Sunday, March 13**

**Fifth Sunday in Lent**

**John 12:1-8**

<sup>1</sup>Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup>There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup>“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” <sup>6</sup>(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.) <sup>7</sup>Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup>You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

Dear disciples of Jesus:

Today the gospel text is a suitable lesson for the fifth Sunday of Lent. Holy week approaches and the passion and death of Jesus lie immediately ahead. The author places the story as an introduction to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and the beginning of his passion and death.

The story is not only about Mary's preparation of Jesus for his death, but also about Judas Iscariot's objection to what he considers a waste of money that could have been better used if it had been given to the poor.

“As John's story turns to the final days of Jesus' life, those who accompany Jesus on his journey to the cross include not only Mary, a faithful disciple who devotes herself and all that she has to Jesus, but also Judas, the unfaithful disciple who steals from the common purse and will betray Jesus. Both are included in John's story of Jesus' death, both the one who is faithful and the one who is not, and their inclusion tells us a great deal about the meaning of the cross and the inclusive nature of God's grace.”<sup>1</sup>

Mary took the expensive ointment and in an act of true humility, poured all of it out on the feet of Jesus. She gave it all. It would never go back into that bottle. She then wiped his feet with her hair.

An important point should be made here about giving our best to the Lord because to give the leftovers, or what we can spare it is not sacrifice. It is only when we give up that which is near and dear to us that we have given in a sacrificial manner.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Feasting on the Word. Year C. Vol. 2. P.140

2 <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/mary-vs-judas> Commentary.

Nard is an aromatic herbal plant from which burial anointment was made. A denarius was a worker's daily wage. Thus, the perfume according to Judas' estimate value of three hundred denarii was worth nearly all of the wages of a complete year.

Can you imagine that? A complete year of work used to anoint Jesus!

But Mary had discerned something that others had not yet. Mary had discerned something so powerful, new, terrifying, and exultant that her action served the world beyond food that nard might have purchased; she perceived Christ's impending death. God would indeed make all things new through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ.<sup>3</sup>

The good news comes as the fragrance of new life in the midst of the stench of death. It is for this that Mary lavishly and extravagantly anointed Jesus. Her anointing of Jesus is not merely the preparation for physical burial but for the whole messianic service, the experience of being buried in shame and humiliation by humankind's rejection and betrayal. Jesus was chosen for burial by those who saw him disrupting their pressing on the positions of power and privilege, concretely, the Roman occupation authorities and the Temple elite of priests and scribes.

This religious elite opposed Jesus because when Jesus embraced the outcasts and sinners, when he welcomed them into his life and went to their homes, when he crossed the boundaries that separated tribe and gender, some feared the loss of their status and privileges. So they buried him in the shame and humiliation of the cross and in the tomb.

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<sup>3</sup> Sundays and Seasons. Preaching 2016. P. 107

The text reveals something that could have probably offended the religious elite. Mary did something that showed love and how to be a blessing and a disciple. By doing this she acted in a way that could bring great embarrassment to herself and risk her own life, Jewish women did not let their hair down in public, and the Gospel says that she anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. When Jesus accepted Mary's action, she was declaring that the rules that were imposed religious and culturally, related to the way women should dress and behave, were not in place inside Jesus' community of disciples. Jesus created a community of freedom in complete opposition to the rules and legalism of the Pharisees and the official religiosity of the elite of the Temple.

A woman that showed her hair in public could be considered a sinner and stoned to death. But Jesus allowed Mary to do so in a very countercultural action.

The religious elite of the Temple chose to kill Jesus but they did not anoint him for burial. They wanted to kill him because he was considered a danger for the establishment.

Contrary to the plans of the religious elite, Jesus was anointed for burial for an entirely different reason: because his death would serve God's work in the world. By being completely immersed in humankind's experience, including our shame and death, Jesus was able to open the way to a new life in his resurrection. This opening toward life from the grave is the new thing that God promised through the prophets. God opened the door to a life that not even death can destroy.<sup>4</sup>

The opposite to Mary's action was Judas' statement.

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<sup>4</sup> Sundays and Seasons. Preaching 2016. P. 108

Judas criticized Mary harshly. He publicly opposed her for an action that he perceived as wasteful, though John points out strongly that that wasn't his real concern.

Judas criticized Mary, but John is quick to point out that he was not criticizing her from a position of righteousness or even true concern for the poor, but his criticism was rather based on his own selfishness. The evangelist says that Judas' critique was not because he honestly cared for the poor, but because Judas was a thief who kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.

We have here a description of the tensions and divisions inside the disciples almost near the ending of Jesus' ministry. Inside the inner circle of Jesus' disciples was a clear division that was not perceptible to everybody.

The author of the gospel does not want to clean the history of the community, he decides to show to the future generations of disciples that the life of discipleship always includes tensions and struggles. The text of the Gospel does not sanitize the life of a disciple, but, contrary to that, exposes the reality inside the inner circle of Jesus' followers to reveal that the son of God not only had to deal with external enemies and opposition to his ministry emerging from the Pharisees and Scribes, but also that the opposition was also present inside the most closed group of disciples.

The opening act of Jesus' last week of ministry is described as a controversy between Mary, who performs a sacrificial and extravagant act of generosity to Jesus, and a reproach from Judas who considered that act of extravagant sacrifice and offering as a waste of resources that could have been used in a different form.

But not only that is described. John's Gospel criticizes Judas, adding that the real origin of Judas critique' was not because Judas cared for the poor, but because he was a thief. In other words, Judas is the disciple inside the community of Jesus that also represents people that joined the group following personal agendas.

What John the evangelist is describing here is that corruption was present inside the inner circle of disciples. A corruption that was increasing gradually and reached its tipping point when Judas accepted money to betray Jesus. If you see, for John's point of view, Judas' betrayal of Jesus started not in the moment when he accepted money from the High Priest from the Temple in exchange for information to arrest Jesus. Judas' betrayal started before, he started his betrayal when he used his position as a treasurer of the community of disciples to obtain personal benefits. Judas was corrupted before he accepted the money of the High Priest to betray Jesus. Judas began to betray Jesus when he betrayed Jesus example and message stealing the money of the community and using that money for his personal benefit.

The gospel lesson today prepares us with the description of two different approaches to discipleship. One that is sacrificial and surrenders the whole life to the following of Jesus and is manifested in Mary's example and another one that is only based in the interest to obtain benefits, this one is personified by Judas.

Mary is the example of sacrificial discipleship while Judas is the example of the opposite.

But, as Luther said one time, where Jesus is present, is present Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the angels, etc. But you can also find the presence of Judas, Caiaphas, Pilate and the crowd asking for the crucifixion.

The good and the bad side of the human experience are always present around Jesus.

We are the visible body of Jesus today. The church is the body of Jesus, the church is a living organism, it is a living community. And like Jesus, the church is surrounded by good and bad people. We will receive sacrificial offerings that will bring fresh air and life into our community, but likewise we will receive critiques. The Church and the disciples of Jesus can suffer abuse or betrayal because the body of Jesus can be anointed by Mary or betrayed by Judas. This is a dynamic that always take place in different moments. But independently of the good or the bad that can surround us, Jesus' body, present in us as community of faith, is here to bring salvation and life to the world.

The work of the church, consequently, is sacrificial. We are open and vulnerable as Jesus was. Think about our daily ministry. Many people come here, many people knock on our doors, call our office and ask for help. Many people receive our prayers, pastoral care and support. Some of them will become like Mary, some other will not, but our mission is not to find who can be like Mary or who can be like Judas. Our mission is to be like Jesus, to be a presence in this city, a presence in this neighborhood and a manifestation of the body of Jesus, in other words, a manifestation that shows, reveals and proclaims the love of God.

To that end, the evangelist expresses the reality of the challenges of the disciples. They were not perfect, they were vulnerable to temptations, disagreement, betrayals, and certainly to suffer abuse and violence in the same way that Jesus suffered.

And the testimony of the gospel is clear, as the body of Christ we are here to follow the same work that Jesus started. The work of God never stops, it continues because the living body of God, the church, is still living in this world and is still surrounded by the good and the bad that this world has.

Now that our Lenten season is near to end and we are approaching Holy Week, let us remember that the real meaning of being a disciple of Jesus is to be part of the body of Christ all the time. We are here to be that body; we are here to incarnate the love of God for the world. Many times we will find people like Mary, who will be generous and sacrificial while some other people will be critical and corrupted, but in the good of the bad, in moments of gratitude or crisis and denial, the most important thing is to remember that we are the living body of Christ and we have a personal and communitarian mission to carry on, we are here to reveal that God is love and forgiveness and live this love every day.

May Christ help us to live our faith with passion trusting in the blessings and protection of God the Father, inspired by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.