

Sermon: How much is too much love?

It might have been the strangest dinner party in history that we shared in today's Gospel reading. For one thing, Lazarus was there. Not long before, he had been dead. Then Jesus raised him back to life, an event that no doubt stirred up the entire village of Bethany. It appears this dinner party was given in Jesus' honor to thank him for raising Lazarus. John noted that Lazarus was reclining at the table with Jesus.

What exactly do you say to a man who has been raised from the dead? Do you ask what it felt like? That's not a normal topic for a dinner party.

But that's only part of the story. At some point, Mary did something so startling it shocked Jesus' top men. They couldn't believe what they were seeing. Every part of what she did bothered them. That's why this story appears in three of the gospels: Matthew, Mark, and John.

But as we will see, Mary knew Jesus in a way his disciples didn't. She saw clearly what was about to happen when Jesus entered Jerusalem. If she didn't know the details, she knew trouble was coming. Big trouble. She knew Jesus was going to die. So, she prepared a gift that shocked the disciples. But Jesus loved it.

It is Saturday night in Bethany, a small village near Jerusalem. In just a few hours Jesus will enter Jerusalem riding on a donkey. Soon he will cleanse the temple, curse the fig tree, teach in the temple courts, and confront the rising tide of hatred from the religious leaders.

Tonight, is the last happy evening he will know. Tomorrow, he begins his final journey to the cross. Tonight, they celebrate. Tomorrow he will enter Jerusalem. In six days, he will hang on a cross. It's hard for us to fathom that, or to think about it properly.

As we ponder this dinner party, our eyes rest on two people: Mary and Judas. Mary never says a word, and Judas says too much. One reveals her heart by what she does, the other by what he says.

Let's focus on two questions that help us unpack this story. First, what did Mary do? Nard was an oil extracted from the root of the nard plant, grown in India. It was, as John notes, very expensive. A pound of nard equaled

300 denarii as Judas reckoned it, meaning it cost the equivalent of a year's wages for a working man in Jesus' day.

Not only does she have a jar of expensive oil, but she also pours it on Jesus' feet. John says the fragrance filled the house. I'm sure it smelled wonderful.

Was that too much? Was that too extravagant? They talk about Mary's "extravagant" love and her "extravagant" gift. That seems appropriate when you are pouring a year's wages worth of perfume on someone's feet. Certainly, that's how the disciples looked at it.

Extravagance is in the eye of the beholder. When we talk about something being extravagant, we're always talking about someone else, usually someone a lot richer than we are.

Whatever else we may say, Mary's gift didn't seem extravagant to her. She wasn't trying to show off or to make a statement about her wealth. John points out that Judas objected to this "wasteful" extravagance, but Matthew and Mark make it clear the other disciples joined in. They were indignant that Mary would spend so much on perfume that was just poured out on Jesus' feet. Why not use the money to feed the poor? Good question. We'll talk about that in a moment.

So, why did Mary sit at Jesus feet? Remember that Jesus had recently raised Lazarus from the dead. If you think about it, this is the only time in history that two men who would be raised from the dead ate at the same table.

Lazarus had been raised, and Jesus would be raised. So, it was an utterly remarkable occasion. When Mary saw Jesus raise her brother, it revealed to her that Jesus was much more than a teacher or a prophet. She knew he had power and authority that could only come from God.

In the Old Testament four groups were anointed: kings, prophets, priests, and the dead. Jesus fits the first three groups. In a few days he will join the fourth. It seems Mary understood Jesus better than his own men did.

Mary takes center stage three times in the New Testament, and all three times she is sitting at Jesus' feet.

In Luke 10 she wants to hear the words of the Lord.
In John 11 she wants to experience the works of the Lord.
In John 12 she wants to declare the worth of the Lord.

She did not come to eat the meal. She did not come to fellowship with the others. She did not come to ask a question. She came to give her best to Jesus.

Her desire to honor Jesus moves her to violate the customs of the day. A woman would not normally sit at a man's feet, much less let down her hair in public, and certainly not wipe his feet with her hair. It was, in a sense, a very private act that others were permitted to see.

When Judas objects to Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet with the expensive perfume, Jesus responds this way: "Leave her alone; she has kept it for the day of my burial". That comment would not have made much sense at that moment. The disciples wouldn't understand it until after the crucifixion.

Does it mean she has special knowledge about his upcoming death? Certainly, he had spoken about it on numerous occasions. Was she the only one that had paid attention? No doubt she sensed the gathering clouds of hatred and opposition.

She would have realized Jesus didn't "fit" in the world of the Pharisees and the other religious leaders. No man who hung out with drunkards and prostitutes and who was called a "friend of sinners" could last very long. He touched a leper and let a prostitute touch him. Perhaps Mary surveyed the scene and concluded that Jesus, whom she loved, was not long for this world.

True love, deep love, honest-to-goodness love can't be explained. Even when you see it, you don't understand it.

Judas had a good point, but so what? Love has its reasons, and those reasons can't always be spelled out.

What can we say about Mary? She is all in, fully committed, and she doesn't care what others think. I'm sure she heard the remarks Judas, and

the others were making, but I doubt they bothered her. A woman who would do what she did isn't likely to worry about what others think. Mary's gift to Jesus was so extravagant and so unusual, his top men couldn't understand it.

That leads me to one further thought. If my faith never causes me to do things that make no sense to others, including my Christian friends, perhaps I'm playing it too safe. If everything I say and do seems perfectly comprehensible to the world, then I need to do some soul-searching. The world says Mary was a fool to do what she did. Would the world ever say that about me?

So, why was Judas so upset? In thinking about this, keep two things in mind: Judas isn't yet the betrayer Judas we know when this takes place. John says that Judas is "about" to betray Jesus. Mary anoints Jesus on Saturday night. Judas will betray Jesus in five days. So, Judas isn't the bad guy he's about to become when he makes this objection.

When Matthew and Mark tell the same story, they both point out that many (perhaps most) of the other disciples made the same objection. Judas may have been the one to speak up, but he said what the others were thinking.

At this point in the story, no one has any reason to suspect his coming betrayal. After all, you don't put a suspicious person in charge of the moneybag. You give it to someone you trust. This means the other disciples held Judas in high regard, and it also means they were not good judges of character. Judas fooled them completely.

That brings us to his objection. Where did Mary get the money to buy that expensive nard? No one knows, and it is useless to speculate. What can't be denied is that her gift was profound and, in the eyes of the disciples, reckless. Why "waste" the perfume by pouring it on Jesus' feet? Why not give it to the poor?

Jesus' response shows he welcomes Mary's extravagance. It's as if Jesus is saying, "Don't use your phony compassion as an excuse to criticize Mary. The law commands you to show kindness to the poor. You are always to care for them. Nothing is stopping you from taking your money and giving it to them right now."

It's not surprising that as Mary worships, Judas speaks up and tries to ruin that beautiful moment. It was Satan trying to change the subject. If he can stop our worship, he'll get us arguing among ourselves, and soon enough we'll stop worshipping altogether and spend all our time arguing.

Here is the fundamental difference between Mary and Judas:

Mary Loved Jesus. Judas loved money.

You can't love Jesus and love money at the same time. You have to choose. You will hate one and love the other.

Mary made her choice. Judas made his.

Jesus was clearly pleased Mary showed such love. That doesn't conflict with caring for the poor. But in this case, Mary chose the better part even though the men thought she was crazy to do what she did. But she was right, and they were wrong. And Judas was worse off than anyone knew that night.

Mary showed her uninhibited devotion to Jesus, which shocked the men who saw it. There are several lessons here, including the obvious one that we shouldn't criticize those who express their love differently than we do.

Do you love Jesus? Good, then don't be afraid to let the world know and don't worry if others don't understand.

True love can't be explained; it can only be observed. If we become far-reaching in our love for Christ, our close friends will likely not understand us. If my love for Jesus never leads me to take a risk, how much do I really love him?

There are moments when we must act even if no one else joins us. Let's wrap up with one verse found in Matthew 26:13, "Wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told in memory of her".

Even as Jesus spoke those words, the fragrance of the perfume filled the house. Eventually the aroma will reach those on the roof. It would spread to

nearby houses. Soon everyone would know about Mary's amazing gift. She did it for Jesus, but everyone benefited, even Judas who disapproved.

Heartfelt worship never stays private. Her gift honored Jesus, but blessed everyone nearby. So, it is with our worship.

Joy is hard to define, but you know it when you smell it. When joy is in the air, it brings with it the aroma of heaven. Something like that happened at Bethany. The aroma of heaven was in the air, and everyone could smell it.

Don't let anyone tell you to back off your love for Jesus. Don't let anyone talk you into being "reasonable" in your joy. Don't let anyone talk you into playing it safe.

How much is too much love for Jesus? There is no such thing. Do you love Jesus? Let your affections for him be lavish. And don't worry about what anyone else thinks.

Mary loved so extravagantly that she scandalized the apostles. But that's why we're still talking about her 2000 years later. Amen