

THE SCENT OF TRUTH

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John 12:1-11

Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

"Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "[It was intended] that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."

Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him.

After Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, it became common knowledge that he was a wanted man and that his life was in danger. If his disciples had warned him before, they knew for sure now that he was living on the edge. The chief priests weren't keeping it secret that they wanted to arrest him. They spread the word on the street. It was like an amber alert, with rewards offered for information leading to his capture.

So movement was more and more impossible for Jesus – not because he was trying to avoid death, but because he was not going to let anyone else determine the circumstances of it. He would die willingly, in the timing he had chosen. So he kept a low profile for what scholars believe was probably around 2 months after Lazarus was raised.

That brought things close to Passover, and Jesus decided it was time. Death was obviously weighing heavily on his mind, and he spoke of it frequently with his followers. There would be no more delaying the inevitable.

When Saddam was captured, he was still hunkered down in a hole in the ground, which no doubt delayed his arrest. Imagine if he had instead chosen to go to a dinner in Tikrit,

thrown by some of his supporters. As soon as he climbed out of his hole and made that appearance, he would have been taken into custody.

Jesus' friends would have known that this decision to come out of hiding would be fatal, or at least would result in his arrest. It was only a matter of when and how things would play out.

This was Jesus' first visit to Bethany since the miracle, and Mary and Martha really wanted to say thank you while they had the chance. So a dinner is held in Jesus' honor. The long-lasting effect of the miracle is highlighted by the fact that Lazarus is there – eating and living a normal, full life. Martha is in her element, serving up some of her favorite dishes as her way of expressing her gratitude.

Attention quickly shifts, though, to Mary, the other sister. Mary, the emotional one, the one who speaks and acts from her heart. And what she does is truly remarkable. It calls to mind a verse from Song of Songs:

Song of Songs 1:12

While the king was at his table, my perfume spread its fragrance.

Put yourself there that night. Everyone is at the table, finishing up their meal, complimenting Martha. “That lentil soup was fantastic.” The conversation is lively, with Lazarus maybe retelling his experience or asking Jesus questions that he'd had since that day. Mary might be unusually quiet. She seems to have a lot on her mind. She keeps thinking about Jesus weeping with her and for her, and then praying to God that people would believe he had sent him. And then seeing Lazarus walk out of the tomb. After mourning for four days, it was almost unbearable joy. She could never put into words how grateful she was. She could never explain to Jesus how much she did believe in him. And now he's being threatened and the situation doesn't look good. She wants to do something. But what can she do? Finally she knows. It's the perfect way to say how she feels without saying anything. So she slips away from the table unnoticed and grabs her alabaster jar filled with nard. Alabaster was the type of stone used because it could help hold in the smell better than other materials. She had been saving it for a long time. Suddenly she breaks open the seal of the jar, walks over to Jesus and proceeds to pour the contents on his feet. And everyone stopped talking.

This was no cheap perfume. It didn't grow in Israel, it had to be imported. Nard comes from a plant that grows in the Himalayas in India. Today if you wanted to, you could buy this much nard for about \$500. But for Mary, it had cost much more. Think of what you earn in a year. Now think of how long it would take you to save what you earn in a year. Then imagine you spent all that on a big bottle of Chanel No. 5. And then you dumped out the whole bottle in one sitting.

You can see why Judas reacted the way he did. This was an extravagant gesture. Not only did it seem wasteful, but the smell had to have been overpowering in that room. Nard has a musky smell and is still used as a main ingredient in incense. There's a

reason those ladies in department stores just spray a tiny bit of perfume on you when you walk by – a little goes a long way. But a pint dumped out all at once? John even comments that the fragrance filled the whole house.

Karin and I went to a church once that was trying to be really cutting edge, and they had incense burning in it. I made the mistake of sitting right by the little sticks and it was almost more than I could take. And that was just a few sticks.

Mary doesn't stop there. She takes her head covering off and lets her hair down. That in itself was a little scandalous, because proper Jewish women didn't let their hair down that way in front of men they weren't married to. Then she takes her hair and begins wiping it in the nard, drying off Jesus feet with it. She doesn't grab a towel. There's nothing between him and her. Mary wanted this to be an intensely personal act.

It's also extremely humbling. Using her hair literally pulls her face down to the level of Jesus' feet. Although she had to have some wealth to have that much nard on hand, the way in which she anoints Jesus showed that she was putting herself in a position of complete subservience to him. All eyes in the room are on her, looking at her as if she is out of her mind.

Especially Judas. This is more than he can take. He's had it with these rich women, the way they flaunt their wealth. He's a working class guy, and he knows the value of a buck. And the way Mary just wasted that nard was unbelievable. Give it to the poor. Give it to me! Just don't pour it into the ground. At least not the whole jar. Come on.

Jesus cuts him off. Back off Judas. Leave her alone. This is more than what it looks like. She's the only one who gets it. I'm about to die, and this is her parting gift. You can take care of the poor after I'm gone, but nobody's going to take away her one chance to do this beautiful thing.

And that settles the matter. Jesus gives Mary incredible credit for what she had done. But what has she done? What is it exactly about her actions that earned such a strong defense from Jesus? Why did he say in Matthew and Mark's versions of the story that wherever the gospel was told, people would tell this story of her?

I pondered that long and hard this week. Often when there is a symbolic action in Scripture, it takes me longer to grasp what is really going on. I won't pretend that I've squeezed all the possible meaning from this story. But I did discover a few truths that hadn't hit me before.

Jesus had a lot of friends and followers. But many of them didn't really get it. They weren't really hearing what he was saying about himself and they never really caught on. But Mary seems to have seen him for who he was on a deeper level than most. Without saying a word, she demonstrates what it is like to know Jesus.

When you know Jesus,

Nothing is too costly to give up.

When I was in high school, a good friend of mine was killed in a car accident. It was the first time I had been close to such a tragedy and it rocked my world. All of life seemed different suddenly. I didn't see things the same any more. What once was important to me suddenly seemed trivial in comparison.

Any time someone close to you is deathly sick or hurt, time seems to stop. Your focus changes and other less significant issues go by the wayside. That had to have been true for Mary and Martha as well. When Lazarus got sick, they were consumed with caring for him. When he died, their grief was deep. They would have given anything to get him back.

Then Jesus comes and brings him back to life. Not only is Lazarus alive again, he's no longer just hanging on – he's healthy enough to walk out of the tomb. Having walked through that valley and come out on the other side, Mary was changed.

She now knew that Jesus could take her through anything, could overcome the most impossible odds. She knew he was God like she had never known before. And that truth made all the difference.

A little jar of perfume was nothing now. She knew Jesus for who he was and still is and it altered her perspective forever.

How well do we know Jesus? If we looked around our lives, what would we find tucked away in an alabaster jar? What are we hanging on to that has seemed too precious to part with?

I was telling somebody last week about our pastor in California. His name is Jim Bradford and he's an amazing man. He didn't start out to be a pastor. He was actually working on his PhD in nuclear physics or some subspecialty of that. Extremely intelligent. While he was in grad school, he started a Bible Study on the campus of the University of Minnesota. The thing exploded. It grew to the point where they had 300 people showing up every week. And he said that when it came time to present his dissertation, he knew he was never going to work in that field. His heart had changed.

I'm sure many people told him, "What a waste. All that education down the drain. All that brain power now spent on preaching. Think what he could have done for God to influence the scientific community." But I can hear Jesus saying "Leave him alone. He's acting out of love and I think it's a beautiful thing."

It's not that knowing Jesus means automatically losing what's dear to us or having to give up a lucrative career. That's a common fear and misconception – that God always makes life hard for us. But look at Mary. Jesus didn't ask Mary to do what she did. She was giving a gift, not having something yanked from her. Still, her heart was revealed when she let go of her prized possession and offered it to Jesus as a gift.

If we're honest with what feels too costly to give to Jesus, it may tell us how well we know him and how well we love him. There's a song with lyrics that say, "Love within reason – that isn't love." Saying "I'll go this far for God, but no farther." That's reasonable, but is it love. We sang I surrender all earlier. Are we willing to waste our best on his behalf, whatever that looks like?

The second thing I can hear Mary saying is that when you know Jesus,

Nothing beats the feet.

We run into Mary three different times in the gospel. Let's look quickly at each event.

Luke 10:38-40

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said.

John 11:32

When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

John 12:3

Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair.

Every time Mary is on the scene, we find her at the feet of Jesus. Isn't that interesting? And each time, it is in a different context. She is doing different things.

In the first instance, Mary is sitting at the feet of Jesus listening. She's there to absorb what he has to say, hanging on his every word. We never outgrow that spot. My dad has said he feels like he should wear a great big letter L around his neck to remind himself that he's still a learner. We'd sometimes like to stand up and treat Jesus more as a buddy than a Master Teacher, but we do well to follow Mary's example of staying at his feet.

In the second situation, Mary threw herself at Jesus' feet to pour out her heart and seek comfort. She cut loose and didn't hold back. I find that so encouraging, because that's exactly what we need to do too. We can throw ourselves on those feet and tell him everything we're feeling. There's no other place we can go like that.

In our story today, Mary's at the feet giving Jesus her worship and attention. She is there as his loving servant, praising her God and loving him. When we come together here in this school, we're sitting at the feet of Jesus and our worship is like oil we're pouring out on him.

Three different scenarios – each one showing that nothing beats being at the feet of Jesus.

Mary also shows us that when you know Jesus,

Nothing trumps the heart.

In Karin's family, the big game everyone plays is Rook. Now if you know anything about that card game, you know the importance of trump cards. One color is always trump and you can play even the lowest value card and win the hand if it trumps everything else that has been played.

Judas tries to play a trump card with Mary. It's the "we need to take care of the poor" card. That's a good one. God cares a lot about the poor. Scripture seems to be on the side of Judas, because there's no doubt that the Bible says we are supposed to look out for other people's needs.

But Mary's act was seen as the better choice, because it was an expression of where her heart was at with God. She wasn't trying to impress anyone or earn points, she just did what she did out of pure love.

It's the same old habit every time. We get focused on the rules, and how we can look good by obeying them. We want to do those things, because they help us feel productive and like we're making a difference.

And God doesn't say they aren't important. What he does say is that he'd rather have our heart. Paul put it this way:

1 Corinthians 13:3

If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't love, I've gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love.

Matthew 22:37-39

Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment.

Loving God with our whole hearts will always win out over working off a list of "shoulds".

There's one last thing that Mary showed me this week.

Nothing compares to what Christ has done for us.

We talked earlier about how costly the nard was, how it had to be imported, how Mary broke the jar and poured it out. We can see in that a great example of what our love for God should be like.

But more than that, we see a picture of Christ's love for us. Salvation was a costly gift he gave us. He was broken on our behalf. His blood was poured out for us. There's an old

chorus that says, “He gave his life, what more could he give?” Mary’s actions paint us a different picture for seeing the truth of the love that Jesus showed for us.

Jesus is also like the nard itself.

Ephesians 5:2

... just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

In other words his grace poured on us is a sweet smell that winds its way up to God’s nose. John said the fragrance of Mary’s perfume filled the whole house, and that’s exactly what Christ’s love does. It is extravagant and fills the whole world. It’s overkill. It’s the full pint poured out in one spot. We will never run out of his love and grace.

Nothing compares to Christ and what he did for us. That’s the ultimate lesson of Mary.

We’re invited to take that message to other people as well and become part of the perfume.

2 Corinthians 2:14-15

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.

He chooses to pour that fragrance on others through us, to touch their lives and communicate his incredible love.

Those are the lessons of Mary. She communicated them all without saying a word. As you think about your own life in relationship to this story, I’d encourage you to ask yourself these questions. First,

1. What’s in your jar?

Knowing what Christ has done for you, what do you have that you can give back to him? What extravagant thing could you do for him? Or, what is too much for you to give him right now? That’s a very tough question to answer honestly. I know I have trouble with it. But it shows me where my heart really is when I’d like to think I’d be as giving as Mary.

2. What are you taking to Jesus’ feet?

Are you in a learning mode right now? Do you need to sit and listen to him? Do you have hurts that you need to bring to him and hear him weep with you? Maybe you’re ready to just worship there and pour your love on him. What are you taking to his feet right now.

3. Who can you pour his grace on this week?

If we are the aroma of Christ, how can we fill the world with the fragrance? Who in your life is needing that today?

