



March 13, 2005
Lent 5

John 12:1-11
Letting Your Hair Down
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According to the gospel writer John, on the night before Palm Sunday Jesus attended a dinner party in Bethany, a suburb of Jerusalem. We don't know exactly who was at this dinner party. Matthew and Mark claim that it was held in the home of Simon of Bethany. But John doesn't tell us that. John just wants to make it clear that Judas was at the dinner, as well as Mary, Martha and Lazarus, whom Jesus has just raised from the dead.

At the dinner party, Martha served - of course. Lazarus, we are told, was just sitting at the table with Jesus. He isn't given any dialogue in the narrative, but don't you wonder what he was thinking? What happened to him while he was dead? Did he see a bright light? Was he sitting there wondering if this was heaven or earth? My guess is, eating with Jesus, he probably couldn't tell. And there was their sister Mary who was just so grateful to have her brother back.

At some point in the evening Mary came over to Jesus, knelt down, pulled the pins out of her hair and allowed it to fall down her back. Everyone in the room must have gasped because this was never done in public by respectable women. But Mary isn't really concerned about social etiquette, and she has only begun to scandalize propriety. She then takes a pound of very expensive perfume, pours it on Jesus feet, and then wipes his feet dry with her hair.

Well, the dinner party has just hit one of those awkward silent moments. As the house fills with the fragrance of the perfume, nobody knows what to say. The excess of this scene is overwhelming. That perfume was pure nard, which can only be found in the mountains of Northern India. A pound of it cost 300 denarii, which was nearly a year's wages. Think about this in terms of your annual income, poured out on the feet of Jesus.

Judas couldn't stand it. So he exclaims, "Jesus, do you know what we could have done with that kind of money?" Now that sounds like a pretty good question. What about the poor? What about missions and the church? What about me and my needs?

Jesus responds to Judas by telling him to leave Mary alone. "You will always have needs, and you will always have opportunity to meet those needs." Jesus' point is that, before you can meet human needs, as his disciple you have to find yourself at his feet also, lost in adoration. Because this is the Savior who is about to walk into Jerusalem and die so that, like Lazarus, we may all come back to life. The heart of Christianity is not meeting needs. At the heart of Christianity is Christ.

Since we are not exactly sure who was at this dinner party, and since it could have been anyone, I want to invite you to the dinner table as well. But the question is: where should we

place you? Would you prefer to sit closer to Judas or to Mary?

Judas had such high hopes for Jesus. He had been a disciple for three years now. But that was actually because he had an agenda he wanted Jesus to fulfill. Some speculate that he was a political zealot. Others think he was a zealot only for himself. It really doesn't matter. When we start to follow Jesus because we have an agenda, no matter how altruistic or selfish the agenda may be, we inevitably reduce Jesus into being a means to an end.

Perhaps you too have high hopes for Jesus. Maybe, like Judas, you got into religion because you had a need you wanted Jesus to fix. You've heard he can feed the hungry, heal the sick, even raise the dead. So you think that maybe someday Jesus will get around to doing a miracle for you as well. But that means that your real Lord is not Jesus. Your real lord is your agenda. Jesus is just a way of getting what you want.

The text tells us that Judas used to steal from Jesus. It could say the same thing about us. We too steal from Jesus when we reduce him to his instrumental benefit, or to the blessings we try to pry out of his fingers. But what if you were offered Jesus plus nothing? Would you still want to be a disciple? In other words, is the love of God in Christ enough for you?

In contrast to Judas, Mary has no expectations or goals for Jesus. She did, once, but she has learned the futility of that. The last time we saw Mary, she was again at Jesus feet. Then it was because she was in grief. She had a pressing agenda for Jesus to heal Lazarus, but Jesus did not hurry and her brother died. After witnessing Jesus' ability to raise the dead, however, Mary now realizes that her agenda was not too big for Jesus, but too small. Now she has given up her expectations that have been poured out like the perfume on Jesus' feet. Now, all that is left is gratitude. That is why she gives so extravagantly to Jesus. Grateful people always want to give.

Well, there they are: two different perceptions of the Savior. Both of them can always be found hanging around Jesus. One of them complaining about what he has not done. The other lost in extravagant gratitude. So again, where do you belong in this scene?

Have you ever noticed that some people have more than their share of problems - their health is chronically bad, they have a family member in trouble, their job is in jeopardy? But still their countenance is always joyful and they are the sweetest people you know. Others have a relatively easy life, but every time you see them they are complaining. That is because contentment has nothing to do with the circumstances of your life. It has everything to do with choosing to be grateful, which is always available to you.

I do not know if there are good measures of spirituality in our lives, but if there were one, I am convinced it would be gratitude. Your level of gratitude is your best indicator that your attention has been focused on the surprising, unanticipated ways that Jesus is giving you life. Maybe like Mary, you too have discovered that your agendas for Jesus were too small. You have now received a glimpse of his agenda for your life, and you are overwhelmed with gratitude.

Isn't it interesting that you cannot feel grateful *and* mean, angry, cynical, or despairing? The

gratitude just pushes all destructive emotions out of your heart. But you can feel grateful and loving, grateful and joyful, grateful and hopeful. That is because gratitude is the air the soul breathes to stay alive.

My grandfather had a favorite phrase he used all of the time. Whenever he would experience the slightest courtesy from another person, Grandad would bring his hand up to the brim of his hat and say, "much obliged." You don't hear that phrase so much anymore. That's a shame. Because the truth of the matter is that we are obliged to others for the best gifts in life. And we are obliged to a Savior who is dying to giving us life. If you remember that, it makes you grateful.

I don't know when Mary bought that really expensive pound of perfume that set her back so much money. The text does tell us that she bought it specifically to give to Jesus. Maybe she had been saving it for a while. Maybe she just knew that this was the time to anoint Jesus with it because he would be killed within a week by the complaining world. What we do know is that she is grateful and what grateful people most want to do is give. What complaining people most want to do is take.

There it is again - your stark choice. Do you want the legacy of your life to be that of a giver, or that of a complaining taker? Choose carefully, because as the Judas stories reveals, complaining and taking will destroy your soul. Amen.