



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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Mary of Bethany

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 17, 2013

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

Based on John 12:1-8

The days of our Lenten journey as a church are drawing to a close. Traditionally, this is a time of abstinence and austerity, or it is a time when we take on new devotional practices, day by day adding new wings to our spiritual houses. We support each other in these forty days, striving to draw closer to the presence of God in this carefully controlled atmosphere.

But today, this stark Lent of ours is overwhelmed by the extravagance of Mary of Bethany.

She's a friend of Jesus, along with her sister, Martha, and her was-once-dead-and-is-now-alive brother, Lazarus. And there is something about Mary that is striking. I wish I could have met her. She appears throughout John's Gospel. Once, when Jesus visits her house, she is the one, in contrast to her sister pattering around the house, she is the one who sits at Jesus' feet like a student, and, given the time, like a man. But she is in the right place. There she listens to his teaching and stories as a true disciple.

She is the one who meets Jesus at the grave of her brother and falls at his feet again. But this time in mourning, rebuking Jesus that he is too late. And (this is what is so striking to me) when Jesus sees her weep, this is the trigger for him to weep, too. What an impression she must have made.

So, Mary learns at Jesus' feet, she weeps at Jesus' feet, and now we find Mary of Bethany at Jesus' feet again, bringing around \$5000.00 worth of perfume. It's in the middle of a dinner party at the house of her risen brother. In the sight of all, seemingly with no warning, she kneels at his feet and pours all of her perfume out of the jar, emptying her small fortune on to Jesus. And then, taking everyone's breath away, she uncovers her hair, takes it in her hands, and leans down to Jesus' feet to tenderly rub the perfumed ointment into the cracks and between his toes. Jesus' feet are anointed. Her hair is soaked. And the smell must have not only overpowered the room, but also have made itself known to the entire village of Bethany.

What she did was over-flowing, sensuous, and white-hot. Half of the people in the room probably fell in love with her, right then and there. The other half were scared to death, and fuming. Mary's perfume marks her as one who has true vision, the one who really sees what the disciples can't bear to see. She is a kind of spiritual genius, able to look upon the harsh truth and to speak it, not in word but in action, a truth that Jesus was quite upfront about: that Jesus is not long for this world, his hour is coming soon, his own extravagant offering is near. This is the offering that Paul marvels at in his letter, saying that all his striving and qualifications and training were rubbish, a waste, in comparison. And now, as Mary sees, now is the time, like the wise men from the East at his infancy, to honor Christ with a gift. All that perfume rubbed in with all her hair. A gift of abundant gratitude at the life he has brought. A gift of comfort amongst the dread that must have been pervasive. A gift that is fully aware and proclaims the gift that Jesus is about to give to us: the gift of his life, poured out, like the perfume, at the feet of the entire world. But, rather than soak in the powerful beauty of this act of devotion, one of Jesus' disciples, Judas, cuts through the fragrant air with his dismissive and churlish protest: "Why are we going along with this? That is so much perfume! Instead of all of us coughing to death, we could have sold that stuff and given it to the poor."

The gospel writer suggests that this is said because Judas is especially craven, but I would expect that many of the other disciples are thinking the same thing. They don't understand because, in their hearts, they are resisting the path that Jesus is taking, the path to Jerusalem

where Jesus will follow God to the end. They are resisting what any clear-minded person, such as Mary, could see. There is not much time left.

But they don't see that the time is now, to celebrate Jesus while he's still here. Not to push against what Jesus is doing, but to say thank you. And Jesus says as much: "Leave her alone, guys. The poor are always there for you to serve, but you will not always have me with you. This is perfectly appropriate. Watch her. Learn from her."

Jesus' response is not an argument against serving the poor, far from it. Christ's convictions on this point have been made very clear, so much so that Judas sought to use that clarity against Mary. If we take Judas at his most stubborn, then few celebrations make sense. How can we have a baby shower when there are people starving out there? How can we throw a beautiful wedding when there is so much need in the world? But Jesus is fully aware of the need that is out there; he proclaimed the service to the needy central to the pursuit of God.

Also, just as central, Jesus called us to a love so amazing, so divine, that to untrained eyes it looks like an extravagant waste. But no. Alongside our service to the needs of the world, there are times to feast and there are times to celebrate, times to give it our all for the good of all. What better symbol of that than a party? Parties and gifts and weddings and feasts, activities of great expense and luxury, are used throughout the Gospels as signs of God's presence and activity. God takes what we give and makes it into a party. How much better, Jesus retorts, to have that party now, while he is still with us.

Mary gets it. And she shows that she gets it. And I imagine that her bold act played no small part in inspiring Jesus to wash his own disciples' feet, six days later, at their Last Supper. I imagine this act gave Jesus a significant measure of strength to complete the work he came to complete. Maybe it was the thing that made the difference for him.

What would it mean for us to be like Mary? I'm a quiet fan of Texas Hold 'Em poker. And there's a move in the game where you can put all your chips in the pot, risking it all to win big. It's called going "all in." Every time someone goes "all in" it changes the character of the whole room, as people wait to see what happens next. Will they triple their money? Or will they lose it all? Just as people can go "all in" in a game, people can go "all in" in life. Like the people who run in to burning buildings to save lives, or the individuals who have the good sense to give their fortunes away while they are still alive, so they can witness (and perhaps properly manage) their legacy as it bears fruit.

In Mary of Bethany, we do not see life lived out in a measured way, carefully rationed out, one inch at a time. But we see her offering emptied out, the whole thing, in one go. Mary expended her fortune to honor Jesus while there was still time. She had her way to go "all in," and she changed our world for the better.

I pray that Mary's extravagant offering of perfume will strengthen us as well. Yes, we live our lives one day at a time. But upon occasion, the saints are called to live their lives to the hilt for God. That's why they are so memorable, and why we continue their memory. But the saints in this room have that capacity as well, to go "all in" for God. I don't know what such a great gift would look like for each of you. But it is rare. And it is particular. And it will be the gift of a lifetime. I believe each of us has that call, a low hum throughout our lives just waiting to pounce when the time is right.

And, thanks to Mary, we have the brilliant example of a successful pounce. May we, too, in our unique way, offer all that we have at the feet of our Master. It may not be perfume. But the sweet smell of your offering, emptied out, that fragrance will fill both heaven and earth with beauty.

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