



**Sermon by: Rev. Dr. Randy Bush**  
**Text: John 12:1-8**

**April 6, 2025**

### **A Study in Contrasts**

There are very few stories about Jesus that are told in all four gospels, but today's gospel lesson about a woman anointing Jesus with costly perfume is one of them. At least, technically it is in all four gospels. The problem is, they tell different versions of this story. In Matthew and Mark's gospel, an unnamed woman interrupts a dinner party where Jesus is the guest and anoints his head with fragrant oil. In Luke, a weeping woman seeks forgiveness and anoints Jesus' feet with oil. And now in John, the woman is identified as Mary, the sister of Lazarus; she puts perfume on Jesus' feet, not as an act of repentance but as an act of devotion. Bible scholars can tell you the reasons for three different versions of this story. Today let's just focus on what we're told in John's gospel.

We don't know why everyone was gathered together that evening. Lazarus had only recently been restored to life, so maybe the dinner was a celebration for him and a chance for people to meet the miracle worker from Nazareth who'd literally called Lazarus out of the grave. At some point Mary stepped forward and without saying a word, she poured expensive perfume from a small vial onto Jesus' feet and dried them with her hair. Everyone saw this unusual act, but Judas is the one who spoke up. He belittled Mary's loving deed by asking why she hadn't sold the expensive perfume and given the money to the poor. Basically, we have here a study in contrasts – Mary vs. Judas – both followers of Jesus, yet the question for us is: Which of the two was the better disciple? Whose example should I follow?

Well, let's start this discussion with a slightly different question. Name for me all the men who anointed Jesus' feet. It's a trick question. No men ever anointed Jesus' feet. One man, a guy named Jairus, knelt at Jesus' feet asking him to heal his daughter. But only women put perfume on Jesus' hair or feet. Men shouted for Jesus' attention. Men asked Jesus questions trying to get him in trouble or embarrass him in front of the crowds. Women came up silently behind him, hoping to touch the hem of his robe – or in this case, to kneel before him without saying a word and anoint him with expensive perfume. This type of gender imbalance was very real back then and sadly it remains a problem today. Jesus recognized this sexist stereotype and turned it on its head when, in the very next chapter of John, he lovingly defied all gender and power expectations, knelt down, and washed his disciples' feet before they shared their Last Supper.

Almost every aspect of that gathering in Lazarus' house was shaped by misogynist biases and social expectations. There were those who were to serve and those who were

to be served, seats of honor for guests and workstations back in the kitchen. Women were constantly deemed second-class disciples. But bravely stepping forward before the gathered group, interrupting whatever else might have been going on, Mary knelt before Jesus, the guest of honor, and anointed him. Jesus then blessed her for her faith while the oil's fragrance filled the entire house. And this story – Mary's story – has been remembered even as so many of the stories about men have been long forgotten.

Now let's consider Judas' role in that evening's event. We've been taught to associate Judas with all things bad. But in fairness we need to recognize that Judas' questions weren't entirely wrong. The perfume poured over Jesus' feet was potentially worth a year's salary. It certainly could have been sold and the money given to help the poor and needy. But Judas' words proved he was a man who knew the cost of everything and the value of nothing. I'm pretty sure that when he talked about giving money to the poor, no actual poor person came to his mind. No real program of feeding the hungry occurred to him. "The poor" was simply a convenient category for Judas' rhetorical flourish implying Mary had wasted money.

Years ago, when I served the church in Racine, our church would take part in midweek Lenten services that included the Baptist and AME congregations in town. My favorite part of the service was the offering. Usually it was led by Pastor Fred Richmond of New Omega Baptist Church. He would tell everyone to reach deep into their wallets, especially if you were a preacher, if you wanted to be a preacher, or if you'd ever thought of being a preacher. He didn't want a noisy collection with coins hitting the metal plates; he wanted a quiet one of fives, tens, and twenties. Pastor Richmond would quote scripture and the congregation usually completed every verse he would start: *Acts 20:35 – It is more blessed to give... than to receive. 2 Corinthians 9:7 – Give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves... a cheerful giver.* Then he'd lean over the pulpit and warn us, "If you don't want to give it, God doesn't want to take it." That man had a true gift.

Judas was guilty of appearing pious, when in truth he was far from faithful. The "poor" to him were faceless, nameless people somewhere out there, mentioned only to make a point. No hungry child was fed that night by Judas' words – just as, if we're brutally honest with ourselves, no one is ever fed just because we like a post or share a link or add an emoji to something on social media. The appearance of justice should never be confused with actual acts of justice.

In this passage we're given a study in contrasts. Judas saw following Jesus as a means to an end, perhaps hoping Jesus would kick out the Romans at last. Mary followed Jesus purely out of love and devotion for this wise teacher and gentle man who'd literally brought her brother back from the dead. Judas said a lot but did nothing; Mary said nothing, but did a lot. Judas stepped forward and raised a big stink. Mary knelt at Jesus' feet and filled the room with a wonderful fragrance. The perfume moved through the entire house. It couldn't be hidden. Everyone smelled it, noticed it, and at some point

was touched by it. That's how you know when something is loving and faithful – when what is done moves outward to bless others extravagantly, freely, without counting the cost – like a perfume filling the very air you breathe.

Let's think about this for a moment, for this idea is more than just a Sunday sermon metaphor. Think about the smell of fresh coffee brewing first thing in the morning. Think about the realtor's advice when they suggest that you bake fresh cookies in the oven just before a home showing. Millions of dollars are spent today having scents piped through the HVAC systems of high-end buildings. Supposedly some Westin hotels waft a blend of green tea, geranium and cedar into their lobbies, while Sheraton has chosen jasmine, clove and fig.<sup>1</sup> Of the five senses we possess, only the sense of smell is directly wired to our brains. Your brain has a reaction to scent even before you are aware of something you smell. The sense of smell is a biological alert system responsible for detecting whether the molecules around us are safe or toxic. A particular smell can unleash a flood of memories that fills your mind with "remembrances of things past." Freshly-cut grass, a bale of alfalfa hay, the saltwater scent off the ocean, rotting alewives along the shore of Lake Michigan. OK - not every scent is pleasant, but that doesn't make them any less powerful!

The bravest act that day in Lazarus' house came when Mary stepped before the entire group, knelt at Jesus' feet, and anointed him with a perfume that filled the house with its aroma. It was a public act of devotion that couldn't be denied or denigrated, even when Judas tried to do just that. It set the stage for Jesus' coming trial, elevating him from a Nazareth social worker to the anointed Son of God and Messiah. And it reminded everyone present that day how the perfume of Jesus' life had touched them all. Would they publicly acknowledge him or deny him?

Sometimes I imagine we all wonder whether our lives have been well-spent, whether how we've filled our days and years have made a difference. Very few of us have the financial means to endow a professorship at a university or underwrite a wing on a hospital as part of our legacy. Few of us have funds available for vanity projects like self-publishing our memoirs or blowing \$20 million trying to influence a statewide election. Many worry that the things they do seem so small, parochial, and limited that they must not be important in the eyes of God. But that is where the example of Mary is helpful. Out of all the things that happened when Jesus walked on earth, this one act of loving devotion has been remembered for thousands of years, captured in one form or another in all four gospels. This act was done without words, but with a lot of heart. This act combined love and affection with an honest, heart-wrenching awareness that one deed could both honor a living Savior and anoint a soon-to-be crucified Messiah.

When you think of ways to put your faith into action, Mary's fragrant deed is the perfect guide. Her act was personal; it was public; and it relied not on fancy words or disposable income, but simply on a faith that insists whatever we do should send forth a fragrant offering to God. For as the good book and Pastor Richmond reminds us, "the Lord loves

a cheerful giver.” To follow Mary’s example means we are to do good personally, one-on-one, patiently, and with love. Do it so that others might see you, not to toot your own horn but as a witness of justice wherever God has placed you. Don’t hide your light under a bushel. Let it shine for all to see. Let it ring forth for all to hear. Let it be a fragrant offering that moves through the space around you, going forth as a blessing to whomever it might reach.

Mary did her deed of love inside her home, before family and friends and the one she humbly knew as the Messiah. Look around – think about the places you visit each day that can be blessed by the fragrance of faith only you can pour out. Never doubt that the least act of kindness and mercy can truly change the world. AMEN.

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<sup>1</sup> “Scent and Sensibility,” James Vlahos, *New York Times*, September 9, 2007.