

Up Close and Personal:
Jesus and the Extravagant Woman
Deuteronomy 15: 1-11, John 12: 1-11

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Deuteronomy 15:7-11

⁷If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. ⁸Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need. ⁹Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: "The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near," so that you do not show ill will toward the needy among your fellow Israelites and give them nothing. They may then appeal to the LORD against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. ¹⁰Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. ¹¹There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.

Introduction

In the Gospels there are two different episodes in which Jesus is anointed at dinner parties. These episodes differ in timing, location, and personalities. Some scholars believe the event happened once, some have conflated the two into one event, etc. One item of note from the Synoptics (Matt.26:6-13, Mark 14:1-9, Luke 7:36-50) is Jesus' own commentary: ¹³Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."

Today we will focus on John's account of this event.

John 12: 1-11

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ²Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him ³Then 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.

⁴But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, ⁵"Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages."

⁶He 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.

⁷"Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. ⁸You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."

⁹Meanwhile 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. ¹⁰So the chief

priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, ¹¹for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and believing in him.

PRAY

In anticipation of his upcoming wedding anniversary, Dan, purchased a really expensive bottle of wine, with the intention of sharing it with his bride. But in the week prior to their anniversary, a longtime friend dropped by for a visit. Turns out, it would likely be their last. The friend was dying, having discontinued treatment for an aggressive cancer. My friend Dan broke out the bottle of wine and shared it spontaneously, over an impromptu dinner—a simple meal became an extravagant celebration of treasured friendship.

The context of this dinner party follows immediately upon the scripture from last week, where Jesus receives a message from these sisters, that their brother Lazarus is gravely ill. By the time Jesus arrives, Lazarus has died, and been in the tomb for four days. Jesus joins the sisters and community in grieving this tremendous loss. Then he prays and calls Lazarus to come out of the tomb. In the final “sign” or miracle Jesus performs before Passover (Holy Week for Christians) Lazarus is resurrected, raised to new life!

It is hard to imagine how one processes the transition from deep grief to overwhelming joy! To experience the loss of a loved one, and then four days later, have that person return to life?! It boggles the mind. But no doubt a celebration is in order!

So, Mary and Martha host a dinner party. Jesus is the guest of honor. We know that their brother Lazarus is present, along with the disciples. There could easily be twenty people or more present. I imagine that these sisters pulled out all the stops.

If you were hosting a dinner party for a couple dozen people, how would you prepare? First, decide on the menu. Then a trip to the market to purchase food and drink; taking time to clean and tidy up; making sure there is enough seating, utensils, food, etc. Plus, one has to prepare the food and serve it!

In some respects, this meal is like a family gathering one might have after a funeral, but the one mourned is at the table! Lazarus is alive and well!

So, this is a celebration of life, as much as it is a thanksgiving meal—a way to show gratitude to Jesus who has given Lazarus new life!

I imagine their spirits were high, there is a sense of deep connection and conviviality as they share this meal. Then in what I sense is a spontaneous act, Mary anoints Jesus’ feet, and wipes his feet with her hair.

This act of anointing is significant. She uses expensive scented oil, the fragrance of which invades the entire house. Anointing is usually done by men to men. For example, a king is anointed by a priest.

Here, Mary anoints the Messiah. In fact, the word itself, Messiah means “the anointed one”. To anoint, is to set apart for a specific, God ordained purpose. But anointing is also done to prepare the dead for burial.

Does Mary understand the implications of her actions? One wonders. Of this we can be sure: Mary was not Presbyterian. She did not do things “decently and in order.” Some would say she acted indecently, as it was considered inappropriate for a woman to let her hair down in public, and this type of anointing would normally have occurred *after* someone died, *not* while one is still alive! So, she did things out of order as well!

This spontaneous act is also an extravagant expression of love. This scented oil is precious, in more ways than one. Judas announces that its’ value is equivalent to one year’s wages, a significant sum to be sure!

Given the prevalence of poverty at the time, Judas criticizes Mary’s action as wasteful. The perfumed oil could have been sold and the funds contributed to POM or the local food bank. What was Mary thinking??

Judas is being duplicitous, hypocritical. He does not mean what he says. He has no genuine concern for the poor, coupled with the fact that he likely finds Mary’s actions scandalous on several levels.

John informs us that Judas was not only the group’s treasurer, but one who was skimming off the top, so perhaps he saw this as a missed opportunity for his own enrichment.

In an unexpected move, Jesus rebukes Judas but he does not call him out as his betrayer, in front of everyone. Jesus himself stays in the moment. Jesus comes to Mary’s defense. (In the synoptics, he says: what this woman has done is a “beautiful thing” for which she will be remembered!)

⁷“Leave her alone,” Jesus replied. “It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. ⁸You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.”

What is Jesus really saying? What is his intent?

Let us be reminded that the one whom Mary anoints, is himself poor. Denied room in the inn, as an infant he slept in an animal feeding trough. He carried on his itinerant ministry dependent on the support of others for food and lodging. He would be buried in a borrowed tomb. By any standard, then or now, Jesus lived in poverty.

Here Jesus quotes from the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 15, which includes instructions on borrowing and lending, on debt collection and forgiveness. Included are specific instructions as to how to treat the poor—with ungrudging generosity, open hearts and open hands, which are to characterize the people of God.

Much of Jesus' ministry among the poor and advocating on their behalf. Yes, the poor will always be among us, but Jesus will not.

In the moment, given the choice between the “nameless” poor “out there” and the poor at her dinner table, Mary serves the poor, when she serves Jesus. Just as it is always Jesus we serve, when we love without reservation, those whom God places in front of us, here and now. Jesus has told us that ‘whatever we do for one of the least of these...we do it, as for/to Jesus himself’ (Matthew 25:40).

Jesus knows that his days are numbered. He receives this gift of anointing from Mary, in the spirit in which it was given—from her heart—for that moment, but for all time: for here we are today, remembering the loving action of this woman. Hers is an act of devotion, of servanthood, of worship. And in this instance, her actions prove prophetic for Jesus will die soon enough. The cross looms ahead...

Jesus is asking: **What will you do, while you still have me?**

One take away from this text is that both Jesus and Mary seize the present moment! Jesus could have focused on the past—all the accomplishments of his ministry. OR he could have focused on the future—all the pain and suffering he was soon to endure. But it is instructive that Jesus does neither!

Instead, Jesus lives into the present moment: Savoring every bite of food, every sip of wine, enjoying every conversation, looking deeply into the eyes of his friends. Jesus received the give of Mary's love and worship.

Mary's behavior is instructive also: Instead of focusing on the past, OR fretting about the future, Mary lives into the present moment, expressing gratitude and worship.

In this cultural season of CoVid19, it would be very easy for us to focus on the past—the way things used to be, the way the stock market was, etc. OR to fixate on the unknowable future, and thus be overcome with worry, fretting about all that we cannot control.

This text teaches us to act in the present moment:

*to say important things to those we love NOW

*to see the one(s) right in front of us, right HERE, right NOW!

In each present moment:

We are surrounded by the poor—literally, the now unemployed, and hungry.

We are surrounded by the poor—in relationship, those alone and lonely.

We are surrounded by the poor—in Spirit, who lack hope, faith and need good news!

What will we do? How will you and I respond?

When our hearts overflow with love and gratitude, what will we do? Will we hold onto our treasure at all costs? When and for whom will we use it? Unopened, stored up, it serves no one.

Will we hold onto our treasure for dear life OR will we lovingly lavish it, in gratitude to God, upon those in greatest need? How shall we respond?

PRAY.