

“The Path: Almost Done, but Not Yet”

7 April 2019: 5th Sunday in Lent
Salado UMC—Salado, Texas 76571
Preaching Text: John 12:1-8

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“The most wasted of all days is one without laughter” (—e. e. cummings).

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After Jesus raised Lazarus from a tomb, John’s Gospel tells us that Jesus went with his disciples to Ephraim. Rather than go about openly, Jesus travels more or less clandestinely. In a wilderness region Jesus goes to rest, pray, and prepare for his Jerusalem ordeal. Six days prior to Passover, Jesus dines with Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. We expect a festive mood. While Lazarus hosts, Martha serves. All was in place for a fine meal. Then it happened—Mary surprises. Hear the day’s lesson:

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 3 Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5 “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” 6(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it). 7 Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8 You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me” (John 12:1-8: see similar, although not identical narratives at Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; Luke 7:36-50).

Judas’ all too practical question interrupts Mary’s lovely gesture: “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” Despite the fact that Judas is asking, it is a sound question. How many times have we seen a waste of resources that people could use for something useful? Burning oil wells from Kuwait in 1991 quickly comes to mind. One of the most appalling things about war, beyond the loss of human life, is the massive cost of such activity. Surely the human race could put the money to wage war to better use. What a waste.

Yet, even in life’s normal course, we see waste all about us. An old American proverb teaches: “Waste not; want not.” In 1986 for my birthday my family gave me a new clock radio. I put our baby Ry to sleep on our bed and turned on a reading light above the radio. Evidently the spring slowly lowered the light bulb onto the top of the radio after I left. After thirty minutes I smelled something kind of funny—like burning plastic. Sure enough, the whole top of the radio had melted into a pool. I never heard the radio or alarm once. What a waste.

I knew a young woman once who had every God-given gift a person could want. She had a wonderful personality, was smart, a good student, and beautiful. Then she fell into cahoots with the wrong crowd. She went to jail for partaking false drugs. She would have made a wonderful doctor—she had all the natural gifts—but she never even made it out of high school. What a waste!

Judas is plainly no one's favorite. History despises Judas as the worst of all traitors. Few people can conjure a redeeming quality with which to describe him. Yet, Judas posed a good question: "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" His question is so good, in fact, that John uses a parenthetical explanation ("He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief")—in case readers think Judas a bit too thoughtful. In a world of limited resources, Judas asked a sensibly real-world question that any of us might ask: "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"

The Bible is full of texts that urge us to remember the poor. Here are eight of the hundred+ references we could cite:

***When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the Lord your God (Leviticus 23:22).**

***I command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land" (Deuteronomy 15:11).**

***Happy are those who consider the poor; the Lord delivers them in the day of trouble (Psalm 41:1).**

***Those who despise their neighbors are sinners, but happy are those who are kind to the poor (Proverbs 14:21).**

***Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor (Proverbs 22:9).**

***Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy (Proverbs 31:9).**

***Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine (Amos 5:11).**

***Jesus said, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Matthew 19:21).**

An all too real-world question interrupts Mary's lovely gesture: "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" This is a good question asked by an iniquitous person. Thus, I rummaged my mind and searched my brain for an answer. If we hate waste and we want to do as God tells us and help provide for the poor then "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"

The answer lies in the moment and the context. The moment of such extravagance dictates Mary's action. Mary loved Jesus. What may be more important is that Jesus loved Mary and Mary's family. Jesus even brought Mary's brother Lazarus back from death. Thus, it is fitting and proper for Mary to give Jesus the one extravagant gift she could. She gave him everything she had!

Fred Craddock told a story about the time that someone called him late on a Saturday night to teach Sunday school the next morning. The teacher was ill and it was a large class. Because he had little time to prepare, he thought he would teach the Prodigal Son parable, but tell the story backwards to elicit class discussion. When he got to the part where the story tells us “while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20) Craddock changed the story. He said, “His father severely rebuked him and told him to sleep in the barn and put him on bread and water until he was fully incorporated back into the family.” Someone from the back of the class yelled out, “That’s how it should have been.”

Yet, in gospel-life, context is everything. The father’s words to his younger prodigal son expresses why the servants killed the stalled calf and put a robe on the boy: “This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (Luke 15:24)!

The gospel of God is extravagant. At times, divine love calls for excess. This is why Mary “got it” and no one else. She poured out her perfume on Jesus’ feet because that is what the moment called for. It is also why, when Judas asks the question he did, that Jesus tells us something about Mary. Even 21 centuries later we remember Jesus’ words: “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me” (John 12:7-8). Most of the time—God makes us free to be frugal, live simply, and care for the poor. But when Jesus is with us, then this is a time for extravagance!

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