

PASSION OR DEPREICATION?
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University Congregational Church
March 21, 2010

Reading: John 12: 1-8 (NRSV)

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at table with him. 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. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (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.)

"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."

This scene in John's gospel is one that we are quite familiar with. The famous words, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me," have been used and abused by nearly every party in the debates and policies about poverty. The passion of Mary wiping Jesus' feet with expensive perfume is one that often makes us feel a little uncomfortable because it is such an act of devotion that few of us would dare render. We are embarrassed by such a display of love and piety.

Let us take a few moments to look at some of the key elements in this story and perhaps these facts will point us to a deeper truth. Let's begin with the perfume, nard. Nard is grown in the foothills of the Himalayas, and would have to be sent by caravan to places like Persia and Greece. It was very fragrant and was said to fill an entire room with its fragrance. Because it was rare and imported it was very

expensive. Judas said that the pound that Mary poured over Jesus' feet would be worth 300 dinarii. A day's wages in first century Palestine was about one dinarii. That means the nard that Mary used was worth nearly a year's wages. The poet and satirist, Horace, offered to send Virgil a barrel of his best wine in exchange for a phial of nard.

We read that Mary wiped the feet of Jesus with her hair. Later in John's gospel when we read the story of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, the same Greek word for "wipe" is used. Mary's action prefigures the foot washing of the disciples by Jesus.

In Mary's culture a woman would not let her hair down in public. Women who did that were women of ill repute. The act is one of significant self-effacement and humility. People who washed and cleaned the feet of guests were servants. Mary's action was intimate as she exposed herself to the Carpenter. She did not use a Canon towel or a Bounty-Picker-Upper. She used a symbol that has a variety of meanings throughout the Bible. Women were not supposed to cut their hair. Hair was meant to be a symbol of both modesty and a woman's glory. Recall that Samson's hair represented his strength and he was only subdued when Delilah convinced him to cut his hair. I do not want to read too much into the symbol of hair in this story, but Mary uses the sign of her gender, as strength and beauty, to render an act of self-surrender and reverence. Would she ever have imagined that it would become a model that still offers the church an image of humble service?

And what about the statement, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me?" It is actually based in the book of Deuteronomy (15:11). It

is set in the midst of a discussion about poverty and the relationship between poverty, God, and national identity. The basic premise is that there will be no poverty because God has given the land to the people who will be blessed by its bounty and will generously share it with everyone within the community. There will always be someone in need and the nation responds to their needs with its largess. Verse 11 declares, “Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.’”

Now my question is why did John have Jesus only quote the first [art of this verse? Is this a corruption of the text, a scribal omission, or did it represent John’s own theological agenda? Or is that question linked to John’s portrayal of Judas as a thief?

In what sense was Judas a thief? We do not seem to have any other account of Judas skimming from the treasury or stealing by any other means. In fact it seems to be the case that Judas was chosen to be the treasurer because the other disciples were too ignorant to account for their paltry funds. They would not know a debit from a canary. As presented in this story he seems to want to use the money spent on nard to increase their account at the First National Bank of Jerusalem. Further, he declared that such funds would be then available for Habitat for Humanity, the Lord’s Diner, and Interfaith Ministry. Isn’t that what the church is supposed to be about? Isn’t that what the Savior kept harping about? Isn’t that what the preachers are talking about all of the time?

John declared that Judas, in fact, did not care about the poor. So is it possible that what Judas was stealing had less to do with cash and coin and more to do with the

embezzlement of the spirit? Are we dealing less with money and more with a metaphor for those who are pre-occupied with accounting, the bottom line, and percentages of increases or losses with the church's budget? Do we measure our faith by dollars or the spontaneity of the heart? Do we have any business measuring anyone's commitment to the ministry of Jesus Christ by any means what so ever? Will any of us ever go to our graves saying, "I gave too much to the needs of others?" More likely we will say, "I wish I could have done more." But who, other than God, can judge the appropriate measure of our charity?

So let me tell you how I deal with this perplexing story. This June I will celebrate 35 years of ministry. I have served institutions, rural churches, urban churches, and suburban churches. I have started a congregation and, believe it or not, I have closed a church. I have served young congregations like this one and churches that have celebrated their sesquicentennial anniversaries. And just about every one of those churches struggled with the part they were meant to play – that of Mary or of Judas. I have known parishioners who thought the purpose of the church and its ministry was defined by the budget. I have known parishioners who were appalled by the reality of money in the life of the church. The usual complaint is, "All this church talks about is money." Or, "I never hear from the church except for the pledge drive." I have taught seminary students, required to take classes in church administration, who waited until their last semester, and complained that they were not called to the ministry to raise money, administer policy, or supervise church staff.

Despite all of that, I think the hardest reality of all is that the poor are always with us.

There are always more needs than the church can meet. There is always one more cause, one deeper wound, and some greater injustice to minister unto. My congregation or I have often been judged and ridiculed because we did not take on the next human misery or tyranny. It has often been said that we did not care enough, give enough, or serve hard enough. After President George W. Bush was re-elected for his second term I received a very hostile letter from a Unitarian woman who lived on the West Coast. She wanted to know why the clergy in Ohio had not worked hard enough to get him defeated. And no, I am not a member of PETA either.

Of the seven previous congregations that I have served not one of them had an outreach budget in the church's operating budget. If they did it was only for committee expenses. All other funds for the church's outreach were raised or procured through grant writing. Of course people gave money on top of their pledge or there was fund raising that included spaghetti dinners, raffles, bake sales, pancake breakfasts, and *ad infinitum*. There were special collections at Christmas and Easter, and we often had special boxes or baskets for food, clothes, and diapers. At one church we had what we called a "Panty Raid" in order to get new underwear for women and girls at the local battered women's shelter. We wrote grants from a host of foundations, denominational agencies, state block-grants, private corporations, and we were never too proud to accept gifts in kind.

At the congregations I have served we created an after school care program for a rural community, a ministry in the county jail that won the "Liberty Bell" award from the local bar association, trained lay people to be in direct services to parents who physically abused their children, created and sustained a hygiene pantry that

served about 10,000 people a year, prepared the evening meal once a month for the homeless shelter, offered care for families whose children were in a pediatric intensive care unit, and the list goes on.

Personally I have also served on the board of directors for Rescue Mental Health Services, was president of the Board of Planned Parenthood of Northwest Ohio, served on the Mayor's Community Relations Board, chaired the Legislative Issues Task Force for an Interfaith Ministry, served on the Commemoration Committee of the Tulsa Race Riot Commission, received an award from Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays for my effort to expand hate crime legislation for gender orientation, was spokesman for the Lucas County Clean Campaign Committee, and the list goes on.

But wait – isn't this a Judas kind of thinking? Is the question really how hard did you work, how many did you serve, how much money did you raise, or how many awards did you get? That is great for resume building but I am not sure that it finally adds up in the Kingdom of God.

You see, despite all of our hard work and best efforts, there are people who still go to bed hungry, racism and homophobia abound, people die from earthquakes, hurricanes, and violence. There are wars and rumors of wars. In fact, there will always be someone in our community who has an unmet need. No one will write on my tombstone, "He Brought about World Peace." Or, "Hunger Ended with Gary Blaine."

I think we are a little closer to the gospel if we begin with Mary and the Deuteronomist. Let's consider the latter. Deuteronomy makes both an obvious and

gentle point. There will always be someone in need. Out of the bounty of your lives take care of them. Do the best you can. Don't beat yourself up over the fact that tomorrow morning there will be someone else with a need. In fact, you might not even get through the night without poverty knocking on your door. Be generous with the resources that God has given you and don't feel guilty that you didn't save the world. And by all means, do not presume to know what is in the hearts of others or the ways and means that they choose to care for the world.

Perhaps genuine ministry begins with the posture of Mary. She does not presume to anoint the Master's head, or speak his mind, or be his right hand disciple. She makes herself vulnerable to the winds of grace. Mary humbles herself at the feet of love and dares to be intimate with the powers of ultimate benevolence. Exposing her being and her reputation she offers radical hospitality with the means at her disposal.

Was she a little reckless? Probably. Did she go over-board? Without a doubt. After all, would any of us spend a year's wages on one single thing? Isn't this just a bit more emotionalism than we Congregationalists are likely to express? Or are we suddenly back into the Judas camp calculating just how much we are willing to give to God or to others for that matter? Like Judas, we have better ideas about how the church should spend its money on missions, or social justice, or outreach.

The truth is that the actions of Mary frighten us. We are afraid to be so vulnerable. It is hard for us to let our hair down and sing, "I Don't Know How to Love Him." We resist the fragility with which we confront a world of poverty, illness,

hunger, and violence. We really doubt that facing the world on our knees with open arms is really likely to bring one scintilla of salvation.

But that is the wisdom of this story. Mary's humility at the feet of the Nazarene is the foundation for all that we do as a church. Only when we take up the role of servant will God's will be done. With selfless abandonment of our pride the power of grace is released. The Kingdom of God comes with the willfulness to expose our hearts to the needs of others.

I am thinking about another Mary. My friend Mary lives in Toledo. She is gregarious, politically savvy, and seems to know what is going on in just about every social service agency in the region. My friend Mary is also one of the most approachable human beings I have ever known. She is the kind of person that can sit you down and basically tell you that you are just about the most impotent and ignorant human being on the face of the earth. And when she is done you will thank her and ask for a hug. Mary is also the kind of person who will go out of her way to help anyone she can. Color, economic and social station is immaterial to her and she can talk to any and every kind of person with respect and compassion.

I remember one Saturday when we closing the hygiene pantry. The pantry was supposed to be open from 9:00 to 12:00 Saturday mornings. We often closed early because we ran out of products, especially diapers. On this Saturday we were about ready to lock the church when a young family drove up in a beat up old car. The young mother rushed into the building looking for diapers for her infant. We told her we were out and she broke down in tears. She had no money and did not know what to do. Mary walked her out to the car with her arms around the woman's shoulder.

As the woman plunked down into the front seat of the car Mary slipped a \$20.00 bill in the mother's hand. She wept all the more.

This was not a part of our process. In fact, we did not give money and did not encourage our volunteers to give money to our recipients. We did not want to set a precedent and have people think that they could get cash from us. Mary was on the board that designed the project, set policies and procedures, and raised money for it. But Mary was not too concerned about that. She reasoned that would be her problem. She knew perfectly well that the \$20.00 would be gone by the end of the morning, and if the mom had spent the money on diapers, she would need more before the end of the week.

Mary responded to a basic human need in that particular moment. Her charity was spontaneous. She risked vulnerability. She reached into her heart and took money out of her pocket. My hunch is that is not the only time Mary was so generous. The books will never balance with that kind of charity. It's not in the budget but I suspect it is recorded on more lasting ledgers – you know, the kind of accounts that give people a little room to breathe easier. Perhaps these two women named Mary know that this is the kind of perfume that just might revive the world.

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