

A Wrong Question

Fifth Sunday in Lent
The Reverend Glenn E. Ludwig

Sunday, March 21, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

John 12:1 - 8

"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" Well, it's not a bad question. A wrong question, perhaps, as we will see, but not a bad one. Judas may have been a thief and an informant, he may have embezzled money from the common purse occasionally, he may have had other motives besides the high moral ground he seems to project here, and he probably really didn't give a good fig for the poor anyway, but isn't he basically right? Couldn't that pound of expensive perfume dumped on Jesus' feet have been used for a better purpose?

Maybe Judas is right about this one. Maybe Mary should have chosen the less expensive Oil of Olay or maybe just a bottle of good old Old Spice. Nard was imported from the Himalayas, for crying out loud! Couldn't the money have been used to buy food for a starving family, or to improve the school system in downtown Capernaum, or to help the widows and orphans with their meager living expenses, or to buy baseball equipment and uniforms for the Bethany Blizzards?

Just how much did Mary's generous act cost? Judas, who probably knew more than most about the going rate for such a Nieman-Marcus extravagance, suggests that the perfume could have been sold for 300 denarii. Local economists would have estimated that one denarius was a "day's wage" for most people in that time. You do the math. Figure a six-day work-week with the Sabbath off and you're basically looking at close to a year's salary. A year's salary on Jesus' feet, for heaven's sake! Translate that into today's economy and we're talking about \$36,000 poured onto Jesus.

So, the question becomes, why? Why did Mary do such a thing? Did his feet smell that bad? Jesus suggests, in this story, that the perfume has something to do with his upcoming burial, but Mary couldn't have known about that, could she? And even if she did, doesn't she go a little overboard with the funeral expenses? A year's salary could have helped a lot of needy people. That's Judas' point. And if you ask me, it's not a bad point.

But Jesus, in the wake of Judas' accusations, says, "Get off her case." And then he says something that sounds a mite confusing to me: "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." Now what is that supposed to mean?

Let me try to get at the root of the issue with a story or two. John Vannorsdall, retired president of Philadelphia Seminary, tells the story of the first congregation he served, a country church where many of the members had gardens. A parishioner once asked, "Would you like some carrots, pastor?" He answered, "Why yes, a few would be nice." The next day a bushel of carrots appeared on the parsonage porch. Vannorsdall reflected on that: "A bushel of carrots for two people? Were they crazy? Not at all; just grateful to God. A bushel of carrots for the pastor was an exuberant way of returning thanks." And then he concluded his commentary with, "We ate what we could."

I have a similar story to tell. I recall arriving at my first parish in August of 1973, fresh from seminary and ordination. God had chosen to call me to Upper Appalachia, a two-church parish, where one of the churches didn't even have indoor plumbing. I think there was a lesson here for a young pastor, who had just graduated Magna Cum Laude and who thought he knew everything there was to know about parish ministry. Anyway, here I was, and in the first four days, we had four deaths. I was thrown right into the middle of crisis in families.

I visited and prayed and talked with folks. We planned funerals together. I became intimate friends with the funeral director in town, who informed me that at least two of these families probably couldn't afford to give me even a token for burying their loved one. These were poor folks who lived in the hills of the town and who had very little comforts of their own. I assured him that that was okay.

Well, after one funeral, three dozen eggs, four watermelons, and about five pounds of freshly ground sausage appeared at the personage back door with a note, "Thanks, Pastor, for everything." Like John Vannorsdall reflected in the story a moment ago, what were we going to do with all that food? Then there was the other family. A day or two after that funeral, three live chickens were in a crate at the back door. My kids thought we had gotten new pets. What in the world was I supposed to do with three live chickens?

What do you do in situations like John's and mine? You say, "thank you," in whatever and however many ways you can. The gift is a sign of love and acceptance and gratitude.

What does this have to do with Jesus' story today, you may be thinking? Well, it would be easy to go down the road of thinking, "if Jesus accepted a \$36,000 foot massage, would he also have driven a Lexus? Would he ski in Aspen? Would he stay at the Hyatt-Regency at the Dead Sea? Would he always choose Ben and Jerry's?" See where I'm going now? But to ask those kinds of questions about the acceptance of the extravagant gift is to miss the point of the story altogether. The record is clear that Jesus was a true friend of the poor. The evidence is so overwhelming in the Gospels that we hardly need to mention his track record when it comes to befriending those in need.

So, to understand this a little better, and to find out why Judas' seemingly good question is really a wrong one, let's go back and look at the setting for this story. The night this story takes place in John's Gospel Jesus is eating dinner with a grateful family. One chapter earlier in this Gospel, two sisters meet Jesus. It is a few days after a funeral, and they are completely overwhelmed with grief for their dead brother. They even get a little testy and uppity with him. "If you had been here, Jesus, our brother would not have died." Usually when a funeral is finished the mourners gather for a meal, much like today. The strange thing about this meal is that the deceased is present and even bellied up to the table. This very brother Lazarus now sits with Jesus, eating crabs and corn on the cob and drinking beer. How grateful are the sisters? We aren't told the specifics about Martha but she has a track record of whipping up some marvelous meals. I'm sure that a plate of her County Fair winning biscuits graced the feast that night. She was a grateful sister. Her brother, once dead, was back.

We know more about Mary's impetuous response. She, too, was grateful and brought out what could have been the family nest egg, maybe even their life's savings, and anointed the feet of the one to whom she owed everything. Maybe she overdid it a bit. Maybe she got a little carried away. Should Jesus have scolded her for wasting such an expensive gift in such a foolish way? "Leave her alone," he said, which could also be translated, "Forgive her."

Do you see? This is a dinner party where two grateful sisters give thanks to Jesus for restoring their once-dead brother. Was the response extravagant? Did Mary overdo it? Maybe. But how could Jesus have done anything except receive the gifts of two grateful sisters who brought him presents from their once-broken hearts? What could Pastor Vannorsdall and Pastor Ludwig do with gifts of grateful families who were glad to have the good news of promise and resurrection preached to them in their time of grief and loss?

So, Mary anoints Jesus' feet. I find it terribly interesting in the Gospel of John that in the very next chapter we find Jesus washing the feet of his own disciples, an action that clearly points to service in the world. John seems to be saying that there is a connection between honoring Jesus and serving Jesus; between loving God and serving our neighbors.

You know, as I examined this story closely this week, reading it over and over everyday in preparation for this morning, I don't think it's about frugality, or expediency, or money at all. Not centrally, even though it seems to be. This story is mainly about gratitude and recognizing what Jesus has done in our lives. And whether you're rich or whether you're poor, there is a common call to stop, slow down, and give thanks. There will be a time to serve those in need. But there is also a time to be thankful and grateful and maybe even a bit extravagant in our offering to this God who loves us so much he sent his Son to die for us. Our act of thanks may not involve money or perfume at all, but the act itself, like Mary's, will fill the house, the house of God, with a fragrance like no other – the fragrance of love, devotion, and gratitude for the one who has loved us so lavishly and in such a costly, costly way. Three hundred denarii can't begin to touch it. How do you honor and say thanks to someone who has saved your brother's life? Indeed, how do we show proper gratitude for someone who has saved our lives? That is really the right question for this story and this hour.

AMEN.