

Theme: Gratitude

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, we are grateful for your love that was brought to fruition in your son: create in us grateful hearts reflecting your love to a world that so needs signs of gratitude, through your son, the personification of love, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

A few years ago there was a true story about a man in New York City who was kidnapped. His kidnappers called his wife and asked for a \$100,000 ransom. She talked them down to \$30,000.

The story had a happy ending: the man returned home unharmed, the money was recovered, and the kidnappers were caught and sent to jail. But, don't you wonder what happened when the man got home and found that his wife got him back for a discount?

Calvin Trillin was the writer of this story. He imagined out loud what the negotiations must have been like: "\$100,000 for that old guy? You have got to be crazy. Just look at him! Look at that gut! You want \$100,000 for that? You've got to be kidding. Give me a break here. \$30,000 is my top offer."

Mark Trotter concluded his rendition of the story with this thoughtful comment: "I suppose there are some . . . who can identify with the wife in that story, but for some reason I find myself identifying with the husband. I'd like to think if I were in a similar situation, there would be people who would spare no expense to get me back. They wouldn't haggle over the price. They wouldn't say, 'Well, let me think about it.' I like to think that they would say, 'We'll do anything for you.'"

Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. This caused a great commotion among the religious leaders. They feared that the whole nation would go to Jesus resulting in Roman military action destroying Judea and Jerusalem. It was determined that Jesus should die for the nation. Knowing his life was in danger, Jesus and the disciples went to Ephraim.

But the Passover festival was near. Wondering whether or not Jesus would go to Jerusalem to attend the festival, the religion council issued a warrant for Jesus' arrest.

Our story today takes place six days before the Passover. According to John, Jesus is executed the day before the Passover, making the Passover beginning on the sabbath, a Saturday. So it must be Sunday when Jesus arrives in Bethany. Bethany is the hometown of Lazarus, and his two sisters, Martha and Mary. There is a church at the site of their house.

Bethany is on the east side of the Mount of Olives. Before Israel built the wall separating the West Bank from Israel (though the wall is built on Palestinian territory), it was a five minute drive to Jerusalem. It is now a twenty-five minute drive, if you make it through the checkpoint. Jesus is dangerously close to Jerusalem and those seeking his life.

Jesus is invited to dinner. Jesus missed the meal following Lazarus' funeral. Now he gets to eat with his very good friends. Martha serves the meal. Who else? The Greek gives us a sense that this meal was especially made for Jesus. Which makes sense, after all. Jesus did raise Lazarus from the dead! My hunch is that all three of them were very grateful. Just to make sure that we understand that Lazarus is really alive John makes note that Lazarus was there to eat.

Out of immense gratitude, Mary anoints Jesus' feet. If we compare different translations of this verse in different English Bibles, we will find no agreement on wording. So, what was this stuff? When we think of nard, we think of animal fat, which doesn't make this anointing particularly special.

This is an oil that has expensive aromatic additions made to it. Mary may have made the concoction. The base was likely olive oil. Frankincense and myrrh may have been added. The primary addition was the oil of the spikenard plant. This plant is native to India. Its importation and oil extraction would make it *very* expensive. Mary spares no expense to honor Jesus.

Mary wipes Jesus' feet with her hair. A woman in that culture does not let her hair down in public. It would be embarrassing to all present. But John does not mention this. He may just assume that his readers don't need to be

reminded about that which they already know. Even John's readers in antiquity would be uncomfortable with this scene.

Mary does not come prepared with a towel. She may have acted on impulse. All she had available was her hair. A lot of money went on Jesus' feet. It should also be noted that anointing feet was highly unusual. The amount of oil used was so large that its smell filled the house.

We are now told in the story that Judas Iscariot was also there. In case we are unfamiliar with what happens later, John reminds us that this is the guy who will betray Jesus. He questions the use of this oil. He wants to know why it wasn't sold for 300 silver coins and the money given to the poor. I told you this stuff was expensive. It is curious that Judas just happened to know how much that ointment cost. (Show anointing oil from Jerusalem)

We are next told that Judas didn't really care about the poor. He wanted the group's treasury expanded so he would have more to embezzle. John is the only one to make this accusation about Judas.

Jesus tells Judas to back off. Jesus defends Mary and those whose gifts and voices are stifled by the church. The purpose of this oil is to anoint Jesus' body for burial. (Beginning with his feet, I guess.) Hopefully, she didn't use the whole thing on Jesus' feet. In a few days, she will need the rest of it. Mary will stay with Jesus to the end.

Jesus reminds Judas that he will always have the poor, but he will not always have him. Kind of ironic, in that Judas will help make Jesus' death a reality. Jesus is not saying that we should neglect the poor. Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 15:11 that says the poor will always be in the land, therefore you are to open your hand to them.

Stanley Hauerwas says, "The poor that we have with us is Jesus. It is to the poor that all extravagance is to be given."

The point of the story is this: sometimes it's okay to be extravagant out of deep gratitude! What Mary did was an act of love and kindness.

But Judas said it was a waste. If you lived strictly by the Judas mind-set, you would have no Spire on the church, no flowers on the altar, no art on the

wall, no robes for the choir, no fine organ, no beautiful weddings. Your daughter would come to you and say, “I’m in love and I’m so happy. I want to get married.” And you would say, “Well, why don’t you just elope? It’s much cheaper. It would be wasteful to have a wedding.”

But the Mary mind-set says, “Sometimes in the name of love and kindness and gratefulness; it’s okay. Indeed, it’s beautiful to be extravagant.”

In a few days, Jesus will wash the feet of his disciples – with water not perfume. Still, even feet washed with water should make the room smell better. But smell or no smell, washing feet is a supreme act of discipleship. A disciple’s life is being washed and washing. We make clean our outer nature, signifying our desire to wash our inner nature. Jesus still washes us spiritually clean. What will we do for Jesus?

We now pray: Gracious God and giver of all good gifts, give us the gift of gratitude: touch our hearts for expressions of extravagant love, thereby showing the world what Christians are capable of, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Text: **John 12:1–8** (NRSV)

¹ 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.”