

"Well, that was awkward!"
Reading from the Old Testament: Deuteronomy 15:7-8, 11
Reading from the Gospels: John 12:1-8

Well, that was awkward! I have to be honest, if I was some minor nameless disciple sitting at the junior varsity table during Lazarus' Revivification Party, that could well have been my summary of the evening's spectacle. And as Mary acted on her expensive and bold impulse, my face would have mimicked the shocked expressions of two-thirds of last Sunday's Oscars audience.

Watching Mary, I'd be thinking, did I just see what I think I saw, or, overdosed on the fumes of Chanel No. 5, was I hallucinating? You know, perfume is subject to the law of diminishing returns. Up to a certain point, the fragrance is a party for the senses, but beyond that, the experience deteriorates rapidly, becoming intrusive and then intolerable, downright nauseating. John tells us, "The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume." I'll bet it was! A pound of costly nard. You know, Lazarus, I'd hate to miss dessert, but I'd rather skip it than pass out.

A pound of costly and reportedly *pure* nard. Spikenard is a blossoming perennial with lovely lavender blooms that grows high in the Himalayas. So precious was the perfume it produced that one would only use a touch of it on special occasions. Since Fed Ex wasn't flying any routes from Katmandu to Jerusalem, shipping costs in addition to its rarity would have helped to jack the price into Robb Report territory. Was it hyperbole or was Judas not exaggerating when he claimed the alabaster jar of pure nard was worth the equivalent of nearly a year's salary? Don't you know Martha was busily looking up her Master Card statement when she saw what her sister was doing. "If Mary put this on the charge card, so help me..."

In his review, John lets us in on the highlight of the occasion: "Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair." It is well-documented that Jesus' disciples were a little fuzzy on the significance and direction of what was going on as they drew nearer to Jerusalem. Sure, they could probably sense the increasing tension, the growing opposition to Jesus as they drew closer to Jerusalem, but was there any reason to think this Passover would be different than other Passovers?

Those gathered were probably as befuddled as you or I would be on witnessing Mary's dramatic act. In fact, they could well have been offended, if not about the cost of the perfume as by the intimacy of act. You know where else we read about the use of nard in Scripture? In the R-rated Song of Solomon where the lover exults, "While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance."

So, Mary "anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair." The perfume was exorbitant and the foot massage was, well ... immoderate. Some could even go so far as to label it salacious. Exorbitant and immoderate, two words that are seldom associated with Presbyterians. I mean, can you imagine the look on John Calvin's face if he had been in that room?

"Mary ... anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair." What was Mary thinking? What was Jesus thinking? I told you what I'd be thinking, "Well, that was awkward."

So, what is John telling us here? Where is the gospel, the good news here? Well, I think what we have here is a prescient act with symbolic significance along with a Jesus quote that has been misused

and abused through the centuries to the detriment of Jesus' mission for the world.

There are several reasons for anointing found in scripture. In the ancient Near East, it was a sign of luxury to anoint oneself. One might also anoint oneself on festive special occasions, akin to getting a pedicure on your wedding day. As such, we read in Isaiah that mourners abstained from it.

Anointing was also a practice associated with setting someone or something apart for a specific purpose. Samuel anointed Saul and later David, symbolizing their divinely ordered ascent to the role of king. They would often be referred to as the Lord's anointed. Aaron was anointed when he was set apart as a priest. The high priest was also referred to as the anointed priest. The New Testament speaks of the elders of the church anointing the sick when praying over them. And let's not forget Jesus' titles of Messiah and Christ, both of which are a recognition of Jesus as *the Lord's anointed*.

Culturally, there were other occasions when oils or perfumes were used as an act of hospitality. Before paved roads and sidewalks, the

walk to a dinner party in an arid and hot climate would involve wading through a measure of dust and sporting a fair amount of body odor. So, providing the means for a sweaty, dust-draped guest to freshen up was a hospitable gesture in addition to clearing the air of funky aromas.

Also, it was a common practice to anoint a body for burial, a ritual of respect and a cultural practice acknowledging the stench of a decomposing body. In the previous chapter, John tells us that when Jesus gave the order for the tomb of Lazarus to be opened, Mary's sister Martha protested, saying, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days."

Thus, as Jesus recognizes and acknowledges, the anointing of someone was not out of the ordinary and there is nothing necessarily untoward in Mary's act of devotion. However, what is unusual in this instance is the exorbitance of the offering and the over-the-top manner with which it was presented.

While an offering of ointment for the traveler was not uncommon, the exorbitance of this gift was not connected to any common traveler. You wouldn't even call this traveler a celebrity guest. Rather, this guest

was, as John said, "the Word made flesh." Scholars will tell you that John's Gospel represents a high Christology, which is to say that John is patently intentional in constantly reminding the reader that in Jesus, we are dealing with God. In John, Jesus is always in control of the scene. There are no signs of vulnerability. Even at the cross, it's as if Jesus is directing the scene, unbowed by the torture and pain, fully cognizant and in control. So, it stands to reason that in welcoming this guest, a guest unlike any other, Mary (much like Matthew's Wise Men with their gold, frankincense and myrrh) would offer that which was most precious.

In the early years of the last Century, the work of an evangelical Scottish preacher named Oswald Chambers was compiled in a book titled *My Utmost For His Highest*, the title itself, not only giving the rationale for Mary's act, but also placing before us what could be the thesis statement for the Christian disciple. The title derives from a text in Paul's Letter to the Philippians, where he says, "It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death."

Mary's gift may be exorbitant, but it is not excessive when in the context of its place in the narrative. John says this dinner takes place 6 days before Passover and the meal during which Jesus, himself, will kneel to wash the feet of his disciples; the same meal after which Jesus will be arrested upon the betrayal of the same Judas mentioned in our text today. Betrayed, beaten, tried, mocked, and nailed to a cross, Jesus' own self-offering of love transcends any gift that we could possibly give, any treasure we could possibly offer, any work we could possibly do. As Isaiah framed the promise, "he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed."

In a common hymn of Holy Week, we sing, "love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all." *My Utmost for His Highest*.

Mary's gesture is dramatic and exorbitant, but not excessive. And contrary to Judas' fraudulent claim, Mary's gesture does not rob from the poor. For the truth sewn throughout the Gospels is that a gift to those who suffer, who are poor or vulnerable is a gift to Jesus, a truth that should quash any assertion that excessive gifts where there is need are poor stewardship.

Unfortunately, and for far too long, Jesus' response to Judas' complaint has been twisted to distract attention from the plight of the poor: "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." For far too long these words have been used to excuse our neglect of the poor and imply that the poor have only themselves to blame for their plight. What such assertions don't reveal is the context of the scripture Jesus is quoting here. Deuteronomy 15 says, "If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be ... 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.'" By quoting a portion of it, Jesus is affirming the whole.

The opposition to such truth, such love is coalescing, and this dinner in the home of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha is a prelude to the drama of Holy Week. Indeed, when Jesus is crucified as the Sabbath draws near, there will be no time to properly anoint Christ's body for

burial, and so Mary is, in a way she probably didn't understand in the moment, actually anointing Jesus' body for burial: an exorbitant gesture in praise of the priceless self-offering of Christ on the cross.

I've never been to the Himalayas or sniffed the bloom of the spikenard perennial, but I have witnessed the power of exorbitant gifts offered in gratitude for the priceless gift of Christ's self-giving love. I've seen it in your boundless patient and vigilant care and compassion in the face of someone's suffering. I've seen it in the tireless attention toward efforts that would alleviate suffering and foster the common good. I've seen it in your love for this place and your engagement with this shared ministry. I've seen it as the choir gathers week after week, practicing anthems over and over so that the 3 to 4 minutes they sing them in worship will give our spirits some sense of the immanence, transcendence, and power of God's love. I've seen it in the dedicated saints who work here or volunteer here, tirelessly seeking to awaken our collective spirits to the glory and hospitality of God.

Can you begin to imagine to what one bold act of generosity for the sake of Christ may lead? Last Sunday, we were able to celebrate the transformative life-giving work of Actionnel Fleurisma and our friends

at OFCB in Haiti. Do you think our own Helen Hunter envisioned a thriving church and a school system with 2300 students when over thirty years ago, on a trip to Haiti, she pointed to a young student named Actionnel and asked if he had a sponsor?

Reflecting on the bravery, compassion, and perseverance of Ukraine's extraordinary, ordinary citizens, *The Boston Globe's* Elizabeth Svoboda writes, "When heroes are, indeed, just like us, the question 'Why not us?' becomes exceedingly hard to answer ... Research confirms that acts of moral integrity can be contagious. When people observe others they consider to have high integrity, they often go on to emulate those role models' ethical examples." (Elizabeth Svoboda, *The Boston Globe*)

Valentyna Pushych, an EMT killed as she attempted to evacuate the injured outside of Kyiv, was known locally as "Romashka," which means "Daisy." A friend described her as a daredevil. They said, "She was always 'running to the most dangerous places' to rescue the injured." (Associated Press) Pushych had a well-paid job at a transport and logistics company. But in 2016, she joined the army as a paramedic in response to the separatist conflict in eastern Ukraine.

Who may inspire you? We, like Mary long ago, have to look no farther than the self-giving love of Jesus. You never know what one bold act of generosity for the sake of Christ may ultimately become. Isn't it worth it to find out? *Our Utmost for His Highest*. Amen.