A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

“*Holy Fool*”

John 12.1-8

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A woman named Mary performs an act of almost unthinkable devotion to Jesus. What she does is lavish, generous, risky, a prophetic witness, and a model for us all. She lowers herself down on her knees, and pours gallons of very expensive anointing perfume on his feet, then unknots her bun, and dries his feet with her hair. It’s a gospel stories that engages all our senses.

It was in the middle of a dinner party celebration; what was supposed to be a funeral dirge had miraculously become a celebration feast. Having not too long before been raised from the dead by Jesus, Lazarus shows up to his own funeral wake. We can taste the sumptuous food. For him, surely it never had tasted so good.

If seeing Lazarus weren’t enough of a feast for the eyes, there’s the sight of this woman on her knees using her hair in an intimate, and undoubtedly shocking manner. There’s the feel of the anointing oil and her hair on Jesus feet. It had to feel good. Human feet that had walked around like his had feel good when they are massaged. A lot better than when they are pierced. Above all, the sweet smell of the perfume filled the house. Taste, Sight, Touch, Smell.

Invariably, Mary’s silent but powerful sign of love is usurped by what we hear. She doesn’t say a word, but one of the disciples does. He can hardly stand to watch what is happening in front of him and thinks to himself, is no one going to stop this? If no one else is going to say something, I will. Judas intervenes. He pays no mind to the scandalously loosed hair. His attention is on the bottle of perfume. Why is this being wasted? It could’ve been sold and given to the poor.

The Gospel writer is cynical about Judas’ motivations for wanting to sell the perfume. According to John, Judas was a thief greedily picturing himself pilfering 300 denarii worth of income, but Judas’ punch still lands. *Couldn’t* it have been sold to help poor people? It seems like a reasonable point to make...seems like a reasonable protest. It also hijacks the story.

Read this story in a group setting and almost invariably attention will immediately pass over Mary to Judas protest and Jesus’ response to him. I suppose that’s pretty natural—men are always hogging the spotlight, for starters. We might have the question ourselves and besides, we’re usually drawn to the tension points in any story, and Judas, on many levels, certainly represents the tension in the story, both in his own devious, deceitful, betraying self and in the reasonableness of his concern. We might dismiss the messenger, but the message might still stand. Isn’t this act of lavish devotion actually a waste of what could otherwise be used for good?

I was that guy once upon a time. In college, I served as a summer missionary in Romania, teaching English to high school age Romanian kids and helping lead two church youth groups. I loved those kids. It was a great summer. One weekend in July, all the Baptist missionaries from eastern Europe met for their annual meeting that happened that year to be hosted in Bucharest, Romania. My partner and I were tasked with entertaining the missionary kids while the missionaries had their meetings, which we gladly did. During their meetings, one night, the executives from the mission board took everyone in the group out to dinner at a nice Bucharest restaurant, possibly the nicest one they could find. We sat in a private room around a big, long table and each person could order from the menu whatever we wanted, which basically meant your choice of roasted meat. Now, I’m a big fan of roasted meat. But I couldn’t get past the prices for this one meal. Doing the math in my head, I was bothered by how much this meal would cost. Everything on the menu was at least 15 American dollars! Put in context, I was in college, this was 25 years ago, and we were in a country where you could buy an ice cream cone on the street for a dime. And probably most of all, I’m the son of a Howell, so there’s some built-in cheapness when it comes to food anyway. So $15 was, in many ways, a lot of money. As I recall, I piously ordered a bowl of soup that night.

I actually voiced a concern about this with one of the organizers. “How could the missionaries be wasting that much money on themselves?” I asked. It’s not a universally irrelevant complaint that donated money is sometimes wasted when something good could be done with it. There’s a preacher in Florida who is busy trying to justify how he bought his wife a $200,000 Lamborghini SUV. There’s another one in the Carolinas justifying to the local media about his $8 million house, mostly by blaming the media for asking about it. There are plenty of religious leaders who don’t even bother anymore trying to justify lavish the lifestyles funded by the sacrificial donations of the faithful. They’ve worked out some kind of theology for their self-indulgence. It’s almost a cliché now, and it’s certainly a weapon used against Christianity by those who see church leaders as cynically as John saw Judas—just as sticky-fingers helping themselves to the moneybag.

There is a place for being attendant to the way mission monies are being used for sure. And I guess, I was the self-appointed watchdog that summer. So I actually voiced a very pious complaint to someone. It was received kindly enough: “Son,” I was told, “you mean well, but these people have left their families, their friends, and everything in their lives to live in tiny apartments in often unfriendly cultures, to do thankless work, and try to witness to Jesus every single day of their lives, often with little outward success. They drive small cars, live in tiny apartments, go on modest vacations, and spend what little money they have frugally, besides what they spend on their ministries and give away to help people in need. We’re glad you joined us for a few weeks this summer, but that’s who you were with this weekend. Don’t begrudge them a nice dinner as a way of saying thank you on behalf of everyone in whose name they serve.” I got the message.

There’s a time and place for lavish generosity, given and received. The Gospel, we remember, is not a slow drip but a flood of grace.

“Leave her alone” Jesus told Judas. Don’t mistake Jesus’ enigmatic statement about the poor with callousness toward poor people. “The poor you will always have with you, but you do not always have me,” is not dismissal of the real concerns of poverty or disregard for the suffering experienced by poor people, nor denial what a little generosity can give to someone who is poor. All of those things were front and center in Jesus’ ministry: the concerns of poverty, the suffering by those cast aside by society, and the bit of relief that can come from helping someone in need. “You’ll have lots of poor people to help when I’m gone” is not a dismissal of the poor. It’s a dismissal of Judas.

Judas was a thief, dipping his sticky fingers into the group’s money bag, but I’m not sure he would even need to be a thief for Jesus to shush him here. Judas would betray Jesus and Jesus seems to know he will, but I’m not sure he would even need to be the betrayer for Jesus to silence him. Judas tries to grab center stage from Mary, and while he may succeed getting *our* attention for a while, he never dislodges Mary’s act from Jesus focus. She’s the one we should be looking at here, not him, not at Martha still dutifully serving everyone like Martha always does, not even at Lazarus at his own funeral party.

This is about Mary. It’s about Mary, whose act in its utter lavish wastefulness is a prophetic sign of Jesus’ entire life.

There are several Mary’s in the Bible so it can be a little confusing when you meet one. Besides Mary the mother of Jesus, there’s Mary Magdalene who will play an important role in the Easter story. This is a different Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. This little family seems to be good friends of Jesus. When Lazarus died, Jesus wept. When Lazarus was raised by Jesus, they fell on their knees at Jesus’ feet. This family lived in a village called Bethany just outside of Jerusalem. It was a dangerous place for Jesus to be, in that area with all the people who wanted to arrest him. But their home was safe for him. Lazarus, Martha, and Mary were his friends.

As we’ve seen, Mary comes out from the back room holding a bottle of expensive ointment made from pure nard. As best as I can figure, this nard was an import from India, where the spikenard spice was grown. It’s not hard to imagine trade routes bringing these kinds of riches from the east to the Roman Empire, but how did a little family in Bethany get their hands on something like this? Apparently it was worth 300 denarii, which as best as I can figure out was about a year’s wages for a typical worker. So, what would that be...it’s ridiculous to think about for one person: $20,000, $30,000? Where did Mary get such a thing? Where did anyone get such a thing? Here’s my conjecture to make sense of it: It wasn’t for her personal use. I think Mary may have been a perfume seller, a trader, a small business owner, selling small quantities of this perfume to people in reasonably affordable allotments. For a denarius or two you, they would sell you a small bottle. The ointment would be used by people to prepare bodies for burial and perhaps other special occasions. If this possibility is right, then this family is in the perfume business, they sell essential oils, and she is the original Mary Kay.

If this is right, when Mary comes from the back room with this gallon of perfume, this is Martha, Mary, and Lazarus’ capital for the year. This isn’t just a luxury she can do without. This is their livelihood. I think that makes the story even more poignant. It’s what they will sell over the next year for their business. It’s like a barn full of grain for a farmer. It’s a sheepfold full of sheep for a shepherd. It’s a vineyard with ripe grapes for a winegrower. It’s an olive grove with ripe olives for a farmer. It’s your life. Everything you work for, everything you identify with, everything you depend on. She takes a year’s worth of everything they work for, all they depend on, and pours it on Jesus’ feet.

This is a prodigal sister story . . .wasteful, extravagant. The prodigal son in Jesus parable wasted his father’s goods on himself. Mary does something equally extravagant and, in the eyes of some, equally wasteful, in pouring out the oils on Jesus feet. If anyone should have protested, it should have been Martha. But she is silent.

Some people have a mystical sense of what’s going to happen. They seem to understand before everyone else like they see what others can’t yet see. Mary, like Jesus, sees clearly what Judas and perhaps no others yet understood. In coming back to Bethany at Passover, Jesus was headed to his own death.

There are so many distractions in this story. But at the core of it, still, is this woman, at Jesus feet. This is an act of love for Jesus...lavish, excessive, abundant love.

And it puts before us all questions for reflection on our own lives: what am I laying at Jesus’ feet? What am I pouring out before him, simply in love for him, without selfish motives? When have I ever poured out unrestrained love for Jesus?

The lives of the saints pose these questions to us: Francis, Romero, Theresa. St. Paul in Philippians describes his whole life like an expensive jar of costly oil: I had everything; I’d done everything and accomplished everything. I had every advantage and used it all better than anyone. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more, yet whatever gains I had, I have come to regard it as loss because of Christ. I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ.(Phil 3) He says I am being poured out. (2 Tim 4)

The pouring out of life is a major theme in the life of Christ. We follow the image of Christ himself who though he was equal with God didn’t hold on tightly to that, but lowered himself, to become a person, to death, even death on a cross. This is Christ’s own self-emptying. Mary’s act of pouring out the perfume is a sign of Christ pouring himself out for us. The prophet Mary demonstrates how fully and totally Christ’s self-emptying is in pouring himself out for us. She sees it in a way no one else can yet see. But she sees...and she acts.

And what she gives to us is this legacy. Whenever your life is poured out and you’ve emptied yourself for someone else, remember Mary. Whenever you’re exhausted from your care for others... Whenever you’ve given sacrificially, beyond what is reasonable, simply because you were moved by the spirit and you responded... Whenever you risk something big for something good... Whenever you love big, too big, too open armed, too radically, too graciously... When you open your home, your wallet, your arms, your hands, your calendar, your heart..you holy fool, remember Mary, and ignore the Judas’s and the older brothers and their hand-wringing.

Be generous. Be open armed. Be wasteful and extravagant. Be prodigal.

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