

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent  
John 12:1-8

13Mar16  
Philippians 3:4b-14

Last week, we talked about Jesus' parable of the Prodigal son—maybe talked too much about it! Rest assured, there's only one sermon today, though you may count it almost as an 8<sup>th</sup> Prodigal sermon.

By having this Gospel reading back-to-back with last week's, the similarities are striking. This reading today seems almost like it could be John's version of, or response to, the prodigal parable. The center of both of these stories is an extravagant action, an unwarranted luxury, reckless devotion. Last week, it was the story of a father welcoming home his wayward son. This week, it is Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha, dumping out a ridiculous amount of perfume on Jesus.

Then there is also the skeptical or resistant response, viewing the central behavior as misplaced. Last week, the elder son was in that role of refusing to join the party and today it is one of Jesus' disciples and closest followers, Judas, who scoffs at the extravagant, even wasteful, devotion.

We'll focus on the most surprising change between these mirrored stories, the direction of devotion. We usually hear the parable as being about God's amazing grace and unconditional love and abundant hospitality. In a reversal, here this woman is doing it for God. Now, generally we should hold the extravagance side-by-side and not change the values. As we said last week, we're apt to evaluate that younger son who runs away as corrupt but simply identify the father as generous, when we could

more equally see them both as risky.

Well, today we should make sure we're not downgrading or writing off Mary's behavior for being a woman. We shouldn't see the father as a doting parent, maybe a kindly old man but instead claim Mary's actions are scandalous, perhaps relying on Judas's grim appraisal of her. Please notice that she's not labeled a prostitute or a sinner; that's not in this story (as if that would allow us to write her off or downgrade her to begin with!). While her wiping Jesus' feet with her hair is an incredibly intimate deed, we should correspondingly note that the old father inappropriately went running down the driveway to kiss his son. So the distinction in these stories has nothing to do with one being a respectable male and the other a woman of questionable repute.

The difference, then, is the direction of devotion. Almost by default, we hear the parable of the Prodigal Son as a message about God's forgiveness and welcome for sinners. More even than the love of a parent, we receive it as God the Father whose love really is inexhaustible and eternal. Mary's action today, then, reverses that direction. If that was God's love for us, this might be about our love for God.

But that's a hard category, and in the end I'm not sure it leads us to where we want to be. Last week we cited the small catechism on God's generosity, which goes on to say that "for all this, I owe it to God to thank, praise, serve, and obey." It's a pretty easy view that we *ought* to return to God gratitude of heart and mind and voice, that we *should* bring a reciprocal love to God with all our soul's life.

We could read that in this passage today, that Mary is returning to Jesus and finding a way to pay back what was given to her. There's a lot of current thought on the nature of gifts, whether they can ever be truly free or if, of necessity, it creates a demand in us, that we indeed "owe" something back.\* This is easy enough to see in our own lives, like when someone brings a present to your birthday party. Or the obligation in thank you notes or a return invitation for dinner or even—worst of all—being emotionally in debt.

For Mary we could see this in a much larger sense. It mentions being at the table together with Lazarus. The amazing thing is that just a few verses before, Lazarus was dead, rotting in the crypt. Yet because of Jesus' compassion and love and because of his power over death and his insistence on life, Mary had her brother back, the restoration of the community of family, the wholeness of life as it should be, a glimpse of resurrection. Mary had reason to be enormously grateful to Jesus. So as extravagant as her gift was, it wasn't out of line.

There's all kind of precedent for that in our lives, too. Thinking about health and encountering death, paralleling the situation of Lazarus and Mary's family, we might not be surprised at health care costs and exorbitant bills. When life is on the line, we may find the extravagant expense actually worth it.

Or we could take this as a stewardship story. Then I could tell you that your giving to church is important. What you return as gifts from God to be shared here are crucial (including

for my salary!). We might see it historically in ostentatious architecture of glamorous churches representing faith. But overall I don't believe this story about Mary pouring perfume on Jesus' feet is just encouraging you to fill your offerings with greater recompense.

In the end, while it doesn't seem so astonishingly peculiar that God would welcome a sinner like you—the compassion of the prodigal story we may be eager to claim for ourselves—still, this next direction must seem out of place, well more than you'd lavish as your faithful response.

Indeed, instead of this being about what you owe to God or how you repay a gift, I believe it *is* rather ridiculous. It's an action that makes no sense. We begin to see that by having to agree with Judas: This is a foolish waste! The value of that perfume—costing a year's worth of wages!—could most certainly have been better-used. Caring for those in need is one obvious alternative. Even if Judas were going to steal it, though, he likely would've found a better use than what Mary did.

If there's any question how odd Mary's action is, we might notice that for all of our cosmetics these days, we still don't rub deodorant on our feet, much less even spritz them with perfume. It's meant to be absurd. One person compared it to showing up at a dinner for Mother Teresa with an \$800 bottle of wine; it would just be so apparently wrong, unfitting for her goals, and also, then, against the goals and ministry of Jesus.\*

I'd contend that even his line about "the

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\* see Bayer in *Lutheran Quarterly* vol XXIV.4

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\* <http://girardianlectionary.net/reflections/year-c/lent5c/>

poor you'll always have with you, but not me" rightly highlights or intensifies the silliness, how fleeting it is, without accomplishing anything lasting. Then he says she's anointing him before his death for burial. That alone is shocking. Anointing is a big word for our faith. Messiah and Christ are the Hebrew and Greek words for Anointed. This practice—originally about being chosen by God as a priest or prophet or ruler—has come for us to be centrally identified in Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One.

Yet he isn't chosen to reign over us, to drive out the oppressive empire, to inaugurate a new hierarchy of holiness at the temple. Instead, as Mary understands, Jesus was going to die. Talk about putting your money on a losing horse! Not only is Jesus not going to come out ahead; he's not going to cross the finish line. Six days before Passover, when he'll be arrested and crucified, Mary gives him more honor than would be due anybody else. Not just a last chance to express herself before he's gone, she is showing that in spite of his death or exactly through it, he is indeed the Messiah, the Christ, the chosen one Anointed to do God's work.

Yet again, somehow this one killed for insurrection, a threat to the political establishment, abandoned and betrayed by his friends, tortured and shamed—this ultimate loser still has the greatest value. As Paul says today, all other gains are a loss. Everything else by comparison is "rubbish." It's one of my favorite Greek words: skubala (σκύβαλα) It's Greek vulgarity, literally meaning "crap." Anything else not only pales next to Jesus; it stinks to high

heaven. The only thing that matters is the surpassing value of suffering with this dead loser.

But how do you explain that? We'd have to admit, it is ridiculous to put your faith in this wantonly foolish prodigal Jesus. With Mary, you go looking for God in a guy with smelly feet. You risk this intimacy and make yourself vulnerable. It's impractical that two millennia later you're still gathering here to keep following him, that you continue in this silly devotion. It's ludicrous that you'd give of your income, still trying to further his work, to keep this church of his going. Even to keep giving to the poor ignores doing the obvious thing of keeping it for yourself. You persist in striving after justice that's a long way off. You dare to hope beyond death. You somehow see the world as it isn't. Clearly, you're not following cultural trends. It's weird that you like singing together. Given how much else you have going on, it's even peculiar that you take the time to be here today. You spend your time on plenty of other good things, and you could even find better ways to waste your time than being here.

And yet...here you are. Gathered around the anointed one with smelly feet who just managed to die. Here you are, still at this ridiculous practice, an extravagant waste.

I can't explain it; you'll have to let your faith do that.