

I'm guessing you are familiar with our gospel text this morning for at least two reasons.

First, the story of a woman anointing Jesus with expensive perfume appears in all four gospels. I preached on the parallel passage a year ago so some of this might sound familiar. There are enough differences in the location of the event and the location of where Jesus is anointed; some have the anointing on Jesus's head, and some tell of the anointing of Jesus's feet, that scholars' best guess is that there may in fact have been two different women, and two occasions of Jesus being anointed.

In John's version here, the woman is named: Mary the brother of Martha and Lazarus. The recently resuscitated Lazarus, who was raised by Jesus, who had arrived too late to save his ailing friend. But, nevertheless he *did* bring him back from beyond the grave. And as this telling in John unfolds, one can't help but wonder if Mary's tears as she anoints Jesus's feet and dries it with her hair, aren't a mixture of joy at her brother walking out of the tomb, and sadness because she understands the fate that awaits Jesus.

And after Mary's lovely act of care and devotion, judgemental Judas interjects that that perfume was worth a lot and that it would have been better to sell it and give the proceeds to the poor! I mean, really!

He does have a point. 300 denari would be about a year's wages! *a year's salary*. So imagine if you saw someone pour out anything valued at a year's salary all at once. You would catch your breath, stunned at what you just witnessed. And there, in a moment, it is all gone—all used up when Mary empties her bottle on Jesus' head.

During seminary, I worked at UPS as a preloader. I stood at the back of a truck next to a long conveyor belt, pulling off the packages that belonged in my truck. The UPS center was an austere building of concrete and metal with the slightly dusty smell of pasteboard. Not offensive, it wasn't like working in a barn or confinement building mind you, but there was nothing faintly interesting.

It so happened that there was a female supervisor who did not spare the perfume when she got ready in the morning. I'm not a connoisseur enough to know if it was cheap or expensive perfume. I just know that whenever she came by to see how things were going, it made the truck smell delightful for a while. It always reminded me of this story, and what it might have been like to smell something wonderful in a dry, dusty place.

Furthermore, it's quite likely that there were much worse smells abounding in the town. In fact, due to the reality of open sewers and no running water, it's very likely that there were quite offensive odors abounding, not unlike a field with freshly spread manure.

If a heavily perfumed woman could make a UPS truck fragrant, Mary's use of perfume transformed the whole house and probably an area around the house as well! This was nard, and it was likely imported from India and it was probably worth one year's wages. It was about 12 ounces, the size of a can of pop, and intensely fragrant. Most likely, something that was valuable would have been a family heirloom, perhaps passed from one generation to another. Typically people would have used a few drops, and then only for special occasions. Twelve ounces of such valuable and pungent perfume must have been very nearly overpowering.

Back to the story. . .

After Mary's sweet-smelling generous gift of love and Judas's whining,  
Jesus sets the record straight.  
He commends Mary for her not-so-token of appreciation and affection.  
What she thought she might use to anoint Jesus's body after death,  
she decides to use to anoint him while he's living,  
and in effect, prepare him for his burial.

And Jesus calls Judas's bluff.

If we go back to the reasons I'm guessing the second reason you know this story is because of what Jesus says next, "*you always have the poor with you.*"

Are you familiar with this line? It sounds a bit cavalier, almost uncaring. Almost a sort of resigned sense of "oh well, what are you going to do?"

We know how that is, right? Whenever we pass someone panhandling, maybe we give a few bucks, maybe we don't. But we see in 2025 that there are still the poor among us.

But Jesus says to Judas, in effect, “Let me jog your memory. Let me remind you of what the Lord requires.”

You see, when Jesus says, “You always have the poor with you,” he’s quoting Deuteronomy 15.

Deuteronomy, as you recall, recounts Israel’s history as they are amassed at the border, about to enter the promised land. They have been wandering for 40 years, now they are on the cusp of the promised land.

And in chapter 15, we find Moses’s teaching about the poor. Listen to what Moses says.

- 1 *At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts.*
- 2 *This is how it is to be done: Every creditor shall cancel the loan he has made to his fellow Israelite. He shall not require payment from his fellow Israelite or brother, because the Lord's time for canceling debts has been proclaimed.*
- 3 *You may require payment from a foreigner, but you must cancel any debt your brother owes you.*
- 4 *However, there should be no poor among you, for in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, . . .*
- 7 *If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother.*
- 8 *Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs.*
- 10 *Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to.*
- 11 *There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.*

Two phrases in particular echo in a verbatim way the words of Jesus. Verse 4: *there should be no poor among you*, and verse 11: *There will always be poor people in the land*.

Why should there not be any poor in biblical Israel? Simply put, *because God provides enough*. God has sufficiently blessed Israel with the promised land, a land of milk and honey, and there is sufficient for all of Israel and any strangers in the land as well. If someone is in need, according to God, it is because there is an improper distribution of goods in the land.

So while Jesus commends Mary's costly act of devotion, he doesn't set aside the command to care for the poor. "you can show kindness to them whenever you wish."  
And you should always want to show kindness,  
because *there should be no poor among you.*

And Lord knows we still have the poor among us. We think about those in poverty because we give energy to Alley Shooppe, which does its very best to meet the needs of our neighbors in need. But our national leadership is engaged in a campaign to take from the poor, to take advantage of the poor, and make more people poor. Indeed, the poor are yet still with us.

\* \* \*

Ethicist and theologian Stanley Hauerwas comments

"The poor that we always have with us *is Jesus*. It is to the poor that all extravagance is to be given."

The true church always has the poor in its midst, always treasures the life of the poor, and always stands with the poor. The true church marches against those who oppress the poor, those who take advantage of the poor, and those whose actions impoverish more people.

And the church's prophetic effort to speak truth to power and to care for the poor *is* the fragrance of the perfume on the feet of Jesus,  
Jesus whom Mary anoints,  
Jesus, who will suffer and die,  
Jesus who gave his life for the poor.

May we go and care for all the poor and needy with the generosity and care that Mary shows to Jesus.

Because "it is to the poor that all extravagance be given."

*In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.*