

Today, our lectionary passage invites us into a home in Bethany, a suburb of Jerusalem. We have been here before with Jesus. It seems as if this home of hospitality is a refuge, a safe haven for Jesus. Jesus comes through Bethany one last time to see these old friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

Among this family, Jesus sought and found camaraderie, love, and support. These three are the only individuals in any of the gospels who are specifically said to be "loved" by Jesus. They called him Lord, so they knew who he was, and yet they were not named as his formal disciples. They were such close friends of Jesus that when Lazarus became seriously ill Martha and Mary sent an urgent message to Jesus telling him, "*Come quick! The one you love is sick.*" They figured that Jesus would come to them right away and by his healing touch make Lazarus well as he had so many others. But Jesus didn't come until four days after Lazarus had already died, and the two sisters were deep in grief surrounded by the village mourners. When Jesus did show up, both Mary and Martha at different times went to him and said, "*You know, if you had been here Lazarus wouldn't have died.*" When Jesus arrived he went to the tomb where Lazarus had been placed four days earlier, he ordered the stone to be rolled back from the entrance. The sisters protested that they would be overwhelmed by the stench of their brother's rotting corpse, but Jesus called out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" And the dead Lazarus, still wrapped in grave clothes, came out very much alive.

Mary and Martha, in gratitude to Jesus for raising their brother from the dead, host a dinner for Jesus, to celebrate all that he did for Lazarus and this family. This story shows the intimate detail of this dinner party for Jesus. But the raising of Lazarus is also a turning point of John's Gospel. His raising of Lazarus from the dead, has set into motion the wheels of the machinery that will kill him in just a few more days. He has graduated from the category of "manageable nuisance" to "serious threat." News of the incident has sent his followers over the top. There is not a chance Pilate is going to ignore them during the Passover festival. It is time for Jesus to disappear. Some of the religious leaders in Jerusalem gather: "*What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation*" (11:47). They knew that Rome would not tolerate the disruption of Jesus mobilizing the people. Caiaphas, the Israelite high priest, responds to their pessimism by saying, "*You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed*" (11:49). A plot by the Jewish elite to kill Jesus was set into motion. So his days are numbered and he knows it. It was dangerous for Jesus to travel near or into Jerusalem during the Passover season. Yet, travel there he did. He comes to seek refuge with these beloved friends in Bethany six days before the Passover.

So they take him in, shutting the world out for this one night at least. Lazarus reclines at the dinner table while Martha makes a stew. Finally, supper is on the table and they all sit down to eat, saying what they hope and hiding what they fear. Mary, meanwhile, has slipped away, gone to find something in her room. Martha is used to this. Mary is always disappearing, even when she is sitting right there with everyone else. In the midst of this meal, Mary of Bethany comes into the dining area with a bottle of expensive oil, the sort that was customarily used to anoint the dead before burial. We confuse this account with three others in the Bible. John's version contains several important nuances. In Mt & Mk, it is an unnamed woman anoints Jesus' *head* at the house of Simon the Leper during the last week of his life. In Luke, the scene happens at Simon the *Pharisee's* house, much earlier in Jesus' ministry. Late in the 6th century, Pope Gregory said in a sermon that Mary of Bethany and the unnamed woman in Luke and Mark were really the same person. They were all Mary

Magdalene. Since Luke identifies the woman twice as a "sinner," many have assumed that the woman in Luke was a prostitute, though the text itself does not say so directly. This is how many have come to the mistaken view that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute.

Only in John's version of the story does the woman have a name, Mary, and a relationship with Jesus--not a stranger, not a notorious sinner, but his long-time friend. John's choice to identify these characters specifically shines a light on a confrontation between two of Jesus' closest friends. These two were among the people who knew him the best, and had a stake in his future.

No one notices that Mary has gone again until she comes back holding a clay jar in her hands. Wordless, she kneels at Jesus' feet and breaks the jar's neck. The smell of spikenard fills the room. Then, as everyone in the room watches her, she does four remarkable things. First she loosens her hair in a room full of men, which an honorable woman never does. Then she pours perfume on Jesus' feet, which is also not done. The head, maybe--people do that to kings--but not the feet. Then she touches him--a single woman rubbing a single man's feet--also not done, not even among friends. Then she wipes the perfume off with her hair--totally inexplicable--the bizarre end to an all around bizarre act.

This bottle will not be held back to be kept and admired. This precious substance will not be saved. It will be opened, offered and used. It will be raised up and poured out for the life of the world, emptied to the last drop. Before that happens, Jesus will gather his friends together one last time. At another supper table, with most of the same people present. Jesus will strip, tie a towel around his waist, and wash his disciples' feet. The Greek word translated "wipe" in the phrase, "Mary wiped Jesus' perfumed feet with her hair" is the Greek *ekmasso*. It is the identical word used later by John when Jesus washes and wipes his disciples' feet (13:5). That is a very intentional connection. This is an act of humble service and love. They are to humbly serve and love one another. Mary's act is foreshadowing that event. Jesus stressed that the greatest among his disciples are those who humbly love and serve others. The disciples may watch him washing their feet and remember Mary bending over *his* feet like that, who knew how to respond to Jesus without being told, the one who acted out his last, new commandment before he ever said it.

Significance of anointing. Messiah literally means the anointed one. Mary anointing Jesus in public like this may very well be affirming the truth that Jesus is the true Messiah. She may be saying with her wordless action, "The very One I am anointing in front of you right now, this One is God's Anointed, The Messiah."

Mary's act of extravagant giving seems to have been an uncalculated, spontaneous one. It is a sign of her love and gratitude to Jesus for what he has done for her and her family. Sometimes our hearts are in the right places and we do the right thing out of love, rather than hold back out of fear of what others might think because we may have violated some culturally-conditioned tradition.

Judas says what everyone was thinking. "Why wasn't this perfume sold for a whole lot of money and given to the poor?" That's what Judas wants to know. Jesus had been spending his time with the outcasts of society, the marginalized. But Jesus brushes him aside. We should not let this be quoted as resignation, or shrugging our shoulders in the presence of poverty. What he means is, 'Yes, indeed, we should minister to the poor, and you will have from now until the end of time to do that. You must do that. But Jesus says, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me". Some people look at life only from a monetary perspective, which blinds them to the proper place for

extravagant giving motivated by love. Albert Schweitzer said it well: "If there is something you own that you can't give away, then you don't own it, it owns you." For Mary, extravagant giving based on love goes above and beyond a price tag.

As we continue our Lenten journey, moving now closer to Holy Week, may we also move closer to the spirit of Mary's extravagant, loving act of anointing Jesus. May we, like Mary live out our faith ever grateful for what God has done for us, and act in ways that inspire others, that they too may come closer to Jesus and his all sufficient love for them. In the midst of the ugly schemes that are being plotted, Mary's anointing of Jesus offers a beautiful demonstration of gratitude, love, and devotion. Significance: There will be those who will love and believe in Jesus even when all of the political and religious powers of the day are at work against Jesus.

What about our own hearts and our own giving, our hearts broken open to one another and to the world God loves...those moments when a gesture of love and generosity transforms a situation – a generous spirit that offers forgiveness and healing, a spirit of kindness that offers healing and hope and speaks words of encouragement, a spirit of freedom that gives out of the abundance we live in so that others have enough to live. This woman, even in the face of criticism, held nothing back. This woman, so full of love, is our teacher today. She helps us to recognize who Jesus is, and who we are called to be as his faithful followers.

Do you give out of obligation or out of love? Passionate giving feels very different from obligatory giving? What do you feel when you give?