

Leave Her Alone (John 12:1-8)

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Introduction For the first time in my life I had to go to the courthouse for jury duty this week. I was summoned for juries a couple of times in the past, but each time I had already moved out of the state. Of course, I answered the summons out of civic duty, but I feel the need to warn you that I worked on my sermon while waiting to be called. We also had a wedding this week. My daughter Sarah married Jordan Orth on Wednesday in a lovely ceremony at their home.

Those of you who follow the lectionary know that this year most of our gospel readings come from the Gospel of Luke. Last year was Mark and next year is Matthew. Even though we are focusing on Luke, from time to time the lectionary selects a passage from the gospel of John, which is what happened today. It can get a little confusing jumping from one to the other, but there are stories from John that are too good to miss, like the one for today.

Mary In the four gospels there are four stories about a woman and Jesus at a dinner party. They are similar, but also different in significant ways, and biblical scholars argue over whether the gospels are describing the same historical event or different events. In Matthew and Mark, we read about a woman who anointed Jesus' hair with oil while he was eating at the home of Simon the Leper. But Luke tells us about a dinner in the home of a Pharisee where a "sinful" woman washed Jesus' feet with her tears and then anointed his feet with ointment. In John we have a similar story, but it is Mary, the sister of Lazarus, who anointed Jesus' feet with ointment at a dinner in her house in Bethany.

In the Middle Ages, Catholic preachers and theologians tried so hard to make the gospels agree with each other that they mistakenly lumped all these women together and claimed that the woman with the oil and tears was Mary Magdalene who they confused with Mary of Bethany. This mistake was compounded by Renaissance artists who loved to paint beautiful Mary Magdalene with flowing hair kissing Jesus' feet. Mary of Bethany, Mary Magdalene, and the unnamed woman whom Jesus forgave. Even in Jesus Christ Superstar Mary Magdalene is depicted as a penitent sinner rather than an apostle, and Mary of Bethany was erased from the story. While I was at the courthouse, I decided to google the story of Jesus' anointing, and was not surprised to find that AI makes the same mistake that Renaissance artists and medieval preachers

made by conflating these women. This morning let's look closer at the story of Mary of Bethany as we have in John's gospel without confusing it with the other stories.

Dinner guest John tells us that Jesus was dining at the home of Lazarus whom he had recently raised from the dead. That story was in the previous chapter. Lazarus lived in the town of Bethany near Jerusalem with his unmarried sisters Martha and Mary. You may remember a story that Luke about a dinner in Bethany during which Martha was distracted by much serving while Mary sat at the feet of Jesus. That may have been the same dinner, but it is also possible that had happened another time. We can see from the gospels that Jesus was close friends with this family in Bethany and he must have visited them more than once.

When the Bible says that Jesus was dining at their house, it meant more than that they gave him supper before he went to bed. Dinner was not just the evening meal; dinner was an event. Today we might call it a dinner party. The host or hostess at a dinner put a lot of effort into preparing the meal, and guests were invited to attend. The guest of honor would sit or recline at the head of the table. There would be lots of food and wine, possibly music, and, of course, lots of conversation. Jesus often took advantage of dinners to teach people about the Kingdom of God.

The dinner in Bethany was an especially joyous event because Lazarus and Jesus were both there. The first time we meet Lazarus, whom Jesus loved, was in chapter 11 when Jesus calls Lazarus to emerge from the tomb. I think we can safely assume that this dinner was called to celebrate Lazarus' return to life and to thank Jesus. It is quite likely that some of the food and wine the Mary and Martha served had been left over from Lazarus's funeral dinner. It was a great time of celebration, but some of the people were there, no doubt, out of curiosity to see for themselves that Lazarus was alive. John tells us that some of the dinner guests were not happy with Jesus, but were plotting against him. Spies from Jerusalem had come to dinner in the hopes they could find something to accuse Jesus of and undermine his work.

Nard So there was drinking and eating and maybe music. Some were rejoicing. Some were confused by what had happened to Lazarus. Some were curious, and a few were angry at Jesus. The air was tense. And then Mary does something scandalous. She took a jar of fragrant ointment made from the spikenard plant and used it to anoint Jesus' feet. Suddenly all eyes are on her and the whispers begin.

In those days it would have been surprising for a respected and wealthy woman like Mary to have washed the feet of Jesus. That was a task for a servant or slave to do as guests arrived. As we can tell from the other gospels, it would have been a bit surprising had a respectable woman like Mary to anoint Jesus' hair during the dinner. It was not unheard of, but it would have given the gossips something to talk about. Certainly, wealthy people in those days liked to have perfume and oils in their hair, and it would have been a nice gesture to anoint Jesus, but it still would have struck people as odd for Mary to do that herself in front of everyone.

Criticizing Mary But, for Mary to kneel and anoint Jesus' **feet** with nard and use her hair to wipe his feet was simply scandalous. This may be why Matthew, Mark, and Luke do not include this story in their gospels. That is not how a respectable and wealthy woman should act in front of dinner guests. Spikenard was expensive. It grows only in Northern India and was rare and precious in Palestine. Nard was not an everyday item you pick up in the market. It was the kind of ointment that you used sparingly for special occasions. It is likely that they had purchased this nard to anoint their brother's body before he was sealed in the tomb. What had been purchased for death was now used to celebrate life.

Mary and Martha probably had put some of the nard in their hair just before their guests arrived, but during the dinner, in a spontaneous act of extravagant love, Mary poured the rest of it on Jesus' feet. She probably started with his hair and then anointed his hands before she fell on her knees overcome with emotion. While kneeling she anointed his feet. She didn't use the nard sparingly; she poured it all out, filling the whole room with a beautiful fragrance that wiped away all memories of her brother's time in the grave. Mary had no way of knowing that in just a few days the feet she anointed would be pierced with nails, and that Jesus' body would be laid in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea without spices.

It would be so wonderful if we could stop the story here. It would be beautiful to linger on Mary's extravagance, on Mary's overflowing love and devotion, on this symbol of overcoming the grave and embracing Jesus. We could stop here and sing the hymn from our Easter morning litany, and "grant to us as to Mary the great favor to embrace your feet in faith." But no. There was fly in the ointment.

Judas In this case, the fly in the ointment was named Judas. Judas, who was one of the Twelve chosen ones. Judas who had traveled for miles with Jesus and

who had heard almost everything Jesus had said. Judas who kept the common purse for the traveling band of religious radicals we call the Disciples. It was Judas who criticized Mary for her extravagant act of love. Six days before he betrayed his teacher and handed him over to the police, Judas was already sowing discord. Even though he had been with Jesus and had seen miracles, Judas showed that he had much in common with those who condemned Jesus for his teaching of radical love and forgiveness.

“Why wasn’t this nard sold in the market so the money could be given to the poor?” We still hear people talking this way. Why are we giving money to help refugees and victims of famines and earthquakes in other countries instead of caring for the poor people here? Why doesn’t the church sell its properties to give to the poor? I think that many people say such things not because they truly care for their poor neighbors but because they resent it when someone is generous with their abundance. Being selfish themselves, they criticize those who are generous.

The Gospel of John makes it clear that Judas was not acting from compassion. Judas the betrayer did not care for the poor. At heart Judas was a thief who saw a wasted opportunity to line his own pockets. Judas is the archetype of the dishonest politician or reformer who uses moral indignation and self-righteousness to distract the public from his own corruption and venality. Beware of the powerful who spew outrage, for they may be trying to hide their own embezzlement and larceny!

But Judas’ spiteful criticism struck a nerve that still stings. Soon others were picking up on his criticism and tried to make Mary ashamed of what she had done. They wanted to put this single woman in her place, even while they were eating her food. Suddenly the mood of the party changed from jubilation to resentment. Rather than celebrating the fact that Lazarus who was dead was now alive, that Jesus the giver of life was with them, the crowd began to resent Mary for her boldness, for her extravagance, for her open display of devotion to her Lord. We can picture her kneeling there confused and feeling ashamed that her act of sacrificial love was misunderstood - by everyone except Jesus.

Leave her alone. Jesus faced the crowd and defended her. All four gospels have at least one moment when Jesus defends a woman who is being criticized by his own disciples and her neighbors. We should keep this in mind whenever we hear

people grumbling about women ministers or the generous things that women in the church do. We need to listen when Jesus tells them and us, “Leave her alone.”

Unfortunately, throughout the history of Christianity, the church has generally overlooked the fact that Jesus consistently, insistently, and persistently defended women and the powerless. Jesus is never part of the crowd condemning and rejecting those who are different, those who dare to love, those who cross the barriers society erects. Jesus always stands up for what is good and right and true. “Leave her alone,” he says. She has done something beautiful out of love. Never reject what is good and beautiful and true.

The poor are always with you. Unfortunately, in defending Mary’s extravagant gift, Jesus said something that has been misinterpreted for centuries. “You always have the poor with you.” I have heard that verse used too many times by Christians to justify **not helping** the poor. They say that since the poor are always with us, we should leave people in poverty. That’s right - People quote these words of our Lord to avoid doing those works of love that he commanded us to do throughout the gospels. People misquote Jesus to justify selfishness and greed when he was encouraging us to be generous and open-hearted. The poor are always with us, so we must always care for the poor.

Jesus was a rabbi, and here he was reminding his disciples, especially Judas, of one of the fundamental teachings in Judaism. Rabbis teach that there are two categories of good works: works of justice and works of mercy. Works of justice are those things that are required of us every day, including being righteous and caring for the poor. Caring for the poor is justice, not kindness in Judaism. Acts of mercy, in contrast, are things that go beyond what is required of us to do each day. Acts of mercy are heroic acts of self-sacrifice and generosity. When Mary of Bethany took her precious ointment and used it to anoint someone who was not a member of her family, she was doing an act of mercy. Jesus tells us that such a generous act of love is worthy of praise. Two thousand years later, we remember her gift.

Conclusion Six days before Jesus had a last supper with his disciples, he ate with his friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Six days before Jesus knelt to wash the feet of his disciples, he let his friend Mary anoint his feet. Six days before Judas betrayed him, Jesus reprimanded him for criticizing Mary’s extravagant act of devotion. Even before his crucifixion, Jesus showed us that love is stronger than

death. May we today follow the example of Mary, the sister of Lazarus, and be generous, even extravagantly generous in our devotion to Christ.