

John 12:1-8:

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

I have invited a special guest to be with us this morning. Please welcome – Martha.

Thank you so much for inviting me here to speak today. I'm Martha, and I'm best known as the sister of Lazarus and Mary of Bethany, and for opening my home to Jesus, and then wasting time in the kitchen making preparations while my sister Mary stays listening at Jesus' feet. It's an honor to be able to tell my story about what happened on that day that was just read from the Scripture, that day 6 days before Passover. First, I'd like to back up just a bit. I always knew that Jesus was special – extraordinary -- in the ways he was able to heal and care for people. When my brother Lazarus was so sick, I didn't know how I was going to be able to go on, and Jesus wasn't there. We had sent for him, but he didn't come. Lazarus died, and I felt so betrayed. Where was God? Where was Jesus?

Then 4 days later, Jesus showed up, and he brought Lazarus out of the tomb, alive. I knew then Jesus was not just someone special, but that he was the Messiah. I knew, too, that after this miracle that Jesus performed on my brother, that the religious leaders wanted to capture him and kill him. People were starting to believe in Jesus' ways, which were not necessarily the ways of the religious authorities. They were afraid that he had too much power, that the Romans would eventually destroy us on account of him. After he raised Lazarus back to life, Jesus retreated into the wilderness in Ephraim with his disciples. And here's where the story read today begins.

We heard he was coming back through Bethany on the way to Jerusalem for the Passover. We were so excited to see him again and welcome him and celebrate

what he had done for us, and for so many others. I knew there was a lot to do, and so I began preparing the food and the house. I knew Jesus would come with his 12 disciples and likely many others, and I wanted to provide a good meal. After all he had done for me? Mary, too, knew that things weren't looking good. She saw what was coming – that Jesus was going to be captured and arrested. We both could see that Jesus had given life to Lazarus at the cost of his own life. So Mary wanted to buy the best ointment she could find, nard -- it was imported, and it was very expensive – a years worth of a laborer's wages. This was *her* way of being prepared. It was over-the-top extravagant, but so was Jesus. Lazarus and I, though we were hesitant at first, both somewhat reluctantly supported her request to purchase the ointment. She said she wanted it for his burial.

I was surprised when I was serving the guests and I suddenly smelled that fragrance, that exquisite scent permeated the room. It filled the whole house, and I think the whole region. It was divine. I knew then that Mary didn't want to wait. She didn't want to wait for Jesus' burial to give him the best gift... and I turned around and I saw her, lying at Jesus feet, rubbing his feet with the oil. Then she began wiping his feet with her hair. She didn't want him to see her tears. She wanted the scent of the oil, and of Jesus, to be on her, to be always around her. That moment changed my life. I saw how much it meant to Mary that Jesus was accepting her gift. He was so often the one giving the grace, and now, it was his turn to receive it.

I saw Judas tense up. He never liked Mary, he didn't think she deserved to be in Jesus' presence, and I think he was a little jealous of their closeness. Judas saw this as a perfect opportunity to disgrace her, so he said, "Why was this perfume not sold for 300 denarii and the money given to the poor?" Trust me, I had wondered this myself at first. But the way that oil filled the room, I'll never forget it. I knew Mary had made the right choice. When Judas asked the pointed question, it was a great way for him to disguise his true intentions. I had seen him pocket money from the purse that was meant to go to the needy among us. He couldn't help himself. Mary's gift meant less for him.

But here is what was so interesting about that delicious perfume smell that filled the house—it was like it didn't allow the malevolence of Judas to penetrate the moment. Judas tried to humiliate Mary, but Jesus would never humiliate Judas. Jesus loved Judas, he loved Judas just as much as he loved Mary.

“Oh, leave her alone,” he said... “She bought it so that she might keep it for my burial.”

We knew death was coming. We knew it wouldn't be long. This was her parting gift. This was our goodbye.

“You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me,” Jesus said.

I find his statement so ironic today, because it is indeed through serving the poor that we are continually connected to Jesus. His life was living testimony to the Scriptures from Deuteronomy 15:7-11, which says:

“If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, ‘The seventh year, the year of remission, is near’, and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt. Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.’”

It was Jesus who was now in need, and Mary recognized this. She opened her hands and her heart, lending more than enough, as he had always done for us.

There will always be opportunities to serve one another in crisis, in pain, in sickness, in hunger, in dying. And when we do, we experience the extravagant love of God with us, and this is freedom.

I think Jesus honestly tried with Judas. He was so patient with him, and I don't know if Jesus actually thought Judas would come around, would turn to him instead of against him, or if Jesus knew this was all part of the plan that had to happen. That Judas' betrayal was just as important as Mary's lavish gift. He loved them both.

Jesus wanted to honor Mary and her affectionate and extravagant act. A few days later, as you know, he then mimicked her gesture by washing his friends' feet, and wiping them not with his hair, but with a towel. He honors the tender gestures we give to one another. I see it in this church. I see how you care for one another. You

show up, you pay attention, you listen, you care. You are responsibly and prayerfully discerning about the budget, and yet are extravagant in your giving to the poor. I know about your layette ministry, how some of you knit and sew all year to make clothes for the needy newborns in your community who would otherwise not have any; I know about your ministry to Mill Street, and the cart of food brought to the homeless shelter every month to feed more than 60 hungry people in your land; I know about your One Great Hour of Sharing offerings and Souper Bowl of Caring and the Alternative Christmas Fair. I know how you are always cognizant of your neighbors, and their needs.

I know, too about the ways you feed and serve one another -- the array of food and drink each Sunday after the service, the Saturday breakfasts, the Wednesday Lenten suppers, the Congregational meeting salad luncheons, the Homecoming Barbecues and the Easter breakfasts. I noticed the new windows in the Fellowship Hall. You are thus both generous givers, and you are gracious receivers. There is an intentional balance. This is what Jesus wants us to know: God is a God of abundance, and we are meant to keep the giving and receiving in balance. The poor, yes, we never forget the poor, like you in this church show. And we also are to take time to appreciate and enjoy and enhance the beauty around us in the way of flower arrangements, tables of luscious food, maintenance and upgrades to the building, and especially, the luxury of time together -- time of touching, time of leaning, time of sitting, time of sharing.

The good news is that when we give faithfully, God accepts and multiplies our gifts. And conversely, when we accept God's good gifts, it is a form of giving, for God's love is thus magnified. Indeed, it is through giving that we receive, and through receiving, that we give.

Thank you, and I hope you'll have me back another time.