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John 12:1-8

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

You no doubt have been there: dinner parties where someone does outrageous things, and/or someone else ruins the festive atmosphere with obnoxious comments.

That's where we are in today's Gospel lesson.

Imagine yourself in the story you just heard -- at dinner with Jesus at Lazarus' house, with Mary, Martha, Judas and others. It's the Sabbath, a week before Passover. Jesus has done the miraculous: he brought back to life his friend Lazarus who had been dead three days. There's now a plot to kill Jesus -- and in fact a plot to kill Lazarus. Nonetheless, Mary and Martha are giving a dinner in Jesus' honor for what he did for Lazarus and them.

As usual, Martha serves. As usual, Mary does the impractical, if not to say extravagant and even seemingly wasteful or for some outrageous. At the very least, what she did was rather over the top: Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. She used so much of the precious stuff that the whole house was filled with the fragrance -- some say reminiscent of lavender, or lilac.

In this version, Mary did more than the other story of Martha and Mary where Mary just sits at Jesus' feet to listen to him...

It's quite a moment -- and quite a display of affection publicly. It might make one almost embarrassed to watch.

Then there's a second strand to this story, the one who ruins the moment with the obnoxious comment -- Judas' response to Mary's extravagance. He manipulates the situation to his ends. Feigning concern about the poor, criticizing the wastefulness of Mary's action, he attempts to lay on a guilt trip: "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"

Of course, had they sold the perfume, Judas would have embezzled money from the treasury and the poor would not have seen much benefit...

So the atmosphere at the dinner party was fraught: there's Mary's extravagant, perhaps embarrassing act of affection and devotion and then also Judas' attempt to ruin the moment, introducing conflict, duplicity, guilt in the context of his history of betrayal and embezzlement.

It's clear where Jesus stood: against Judas and for Mary. "Leave her alone," he says. The Greek suggests a stronger response: "You back off!"

And the Greek word implies more as it relates at root to words for: let her go, pardon, forgive her, release her and let her be.

Why is Jesus so interested in protecting Mary's over the top display?

In short because Mary becomes the perfect role model for all disciples of Jesus.

Why is that? Because Mary's dramatic, symbolic gesture does two things: it points to Jesus' death and it is act of true worship.

In this, perhaps her display is not so outrageous or wasteful after all.

How is it that anointing Jesus' feet points to his death? After Jesus tells Judas in essence to back off, Jesus goes on to say: "She bought the nard so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." Furthermore he says, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

He said this knowing full well what was before him: the plot to kill him. And he knew that this would happen soon.

Nard as an ointment is among or at least like the items that the women would end up bringing with them to the tomb. Custom was to anoint the bodies of those dead.

Here's the irony of the moment: they're at Lazarus' house, he who was dead, but now is alive, to honor the one, Jesus, now alive, but soon to die. In her anointing of Jesus' feet, Mary points to the cross.

If the ultimate aim of the disciple is to witness to Jesus' life giving death, then arguably nothing is too extravagant or wasteful.

Friends, this is our calling, too, and that of all disciples, hearkening to the words in our Eucharistic prayer, which itself quotes the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians: "For as often as we eat of this bread and drink from this cup, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

Moreover, Mary's witness to Jesus' life-giving death occurs amidst her act of worship and devotion. She stooped down to bathe Jesus' feet with the precious ointment.

And that's what worship is, at least implied by a Greek word for worship which means literally to stoop down to kiss the earth, bowing before the holiness of God -- why it is that some folks' liturgical piety involves making bows to cross and altar and kneeling and genuflecting.

This worship is not a mere formality or mechanical gesture. It is an over the top expression of devotion and affection, sensual, and fully embodied. And it's generous, again, if not to say extravagant as the whole house is filled with the lingering effects of the aroma of the fragrant offering.

Here again, Mary is the perfect role model.

Our own worship is meant to be as generous and heart-felt, a full offering of all that we are to God in Christ in the power of the Spirit.

So let's fast forward to our own time. Here we are at the dinner party we are throwing in Jesus' honor -- where we eat the bread and drink the cup to proclaim the Lord's death.

The Judases of our world may want to ruin the moments of our worship and devotion at the dinner parties we throw in Jesus' honor, such as the one we're involved with now. A cynical world may see what we do here Sunday after Sunday as a waste of time.

To these cynics, Jesus voice echoes through the centuries: back off, let them be, leave them alone.

For it's precisely in a cynical world that we engage in these public displays of affection for Jesus, and through our own worship to kneel at Jesus' feet as if to anoint him and wipe his feet with our hair.

That, I believe, is how Jesus would have it.

For at its best our worship fulfills our Lord's desire that we witness to his death in a world, and often church, fraught with conflict, betrayal, duplicity, embezzlement and worse. For it is precisely in such a world, and such a church that this witness is needed most.

Our extravagant, generous worship as self offering is an opportunity to proclaim a different set of priorities and to bear witness in the spirit of Paul who said, “Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.”

Mary’s using the whole jar of nard communicated this sentiment.

Oh, may our worship as a witness of thanksgiving for Jesus’ death be as extravagant and generous and over the top as Mary’s, as if every time we assembled our worship would be in keeping with the spirit today’s closing hymn: “...thousand, thousand thanks are due, dearest Jesus unto you... For all that bought my pardon, for the sorrows deep and sore, for the anguish in the garden, I will thank you evermore; thank you for the groaning, sighing, for the bleeding and the dying, for that last triumphant cry, praise you evermore on high.”

Mary’s worship and ours at its best also communicates this.

Here’s the thing: when we so worship, and we have our meal, Jesus’ always disappears from our midst suddenly -- ever fulfilling what he said at the dinner party: “but you do not always have me.”

We cannot stay at the dinner party forever. It doesn’t work that way. And here’s where the poor come in. “You always have the poor with you,” he said. Indeed. Having enjoyed the company of Jesus, fed and strengthened by his life-giving presence, the presence that gave Lazarus new life, we leave the table to return to the world with the poor.

Not that they are ignored because there always there and we can take them for granted, but that we are now in the better position to actually do some good for them. Not skimming off the top of donations to them, as Judas did, but offering ourselves to them and their needs as completely as we offered ourselves to Jesus in our worship. And this out of pure and simple thanks for God’s lavish grace to us communicated through the cross. In this thanksgiving we can give ourselves away to the poor and their needs freely and fully -- again when we’re at our best in the power of the Spirit.

Such an outpouring completes our witness as true disciples, following the example of Mary, pointing to Jesus’ death, worshiping him extravagantly.

I pray that the remainder of this hour has some of this flavor of generous, affectionate, intimate outpouring for you -- and that you would carry this generous Spirit into the world to do the work God has called us to do, that our worshipful witness to the cross would not be confined to this room, and that the world's neediest may be genuinely filled.