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John 12:1-8, RSV

<sup>1</sup>Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup>There they made him a supper; Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at table with him. <sup>3</sup>Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment. <sup>4</sup>But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup>“Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?” <sup>6</sup>This he said, not that he cared for the poor but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box he used to take what was put into it. <sup>7</sup>Jesus said, “Let her alone, let her keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup>The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me.”

In the Name of the Father and of the Son  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Gospel reading today is one of those Bible stories that is so full of twists and turns and questions that it even overcame the natural attraction of the Epistle Lesson for a Lutheran theologian. I believe that God had a reason for giving us so much of his holy Word in the form of artfully composed poems and stories rather providing us with a tidy summary of sound doctrine with clearly numbered paragraphs. I believe that the Holy Spirit uses these strange stories to mess with our minds, to enlarge and reshape our imaginations, as we pay attention and follow those twists and turns. And that is what I hope to do, just a little, this morning.

The scene is Bethany, the village near Jerusalem where Jesus only recently raised Lazarus from the dead. St. John tells us that as a direct result of that miracle and the stir it caused, the leaders in Jerusalem have made a definite decision to seek Jesus' death. And in fact, Jesus' death is only about a week away. It is therefore

a tense and dangerous time for Jesus to turn up again in Bethany. But they still appreciate him there, whatever the power-brokers in Jerusalem may think. The people of Bethany hold a feast for him, with the recently rescued Lazarus an honored guest, and his sister Martha helping serve the tables. It is a cheerful scene, a happy moment on the verge of the Passion.

But then something happens that ramps things up to another plane. Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, comes into the dining room with a pound-weight of outrageously expensive ointment – pure nard, concentrated stuff, made from a fragrant herb. She takes this pound of ointment and pours it out on Jesus’ feet, and the fragrance of it fills the whole house. The atmosphere changes, then; from a cheerful neighborly occasion this has suddenly become a moment in which something strange and mysterious has happened.

Now, the New Testament writers generally expect us to be much closer readers of the Old Testament than we usually are today, and there are two very significant allusions to the Greek version of the Old Testament in these opening verses.

The first is from the first chapter of the Song of Songs, where the Bride is remembering the presence of her royal Bridegroom and what it meant to her: “While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance” (Sol 1:12 RSV). The “couch” here is the dining-couch where ancient people reclined during their meals. The fragrance of the ointment honors the majesty and beauty of the Bridegroom who has come to feast with his Bride; it is a sign and image of the Bride’s love. Mary’s extravagant gesture honors Jesus as the Bridegroom of Israel, the Messianic King who has come to rescue and redeem his Bride. It is an act of homage and love, a passionate declaration of allegiance. It is, given everything, a *risky* gesture: the Jerusalem authorities have their spies even in Bethany, as we know from the story of Lazarus.

The second allusion implies even more: in the Greek version of the great vision of Isaiah in the Temple, the prophet sees the Lord “sitting on a high and uplifted throne, *and the house was filled with his glory*” (Isaiah 6:1, LXX). The Evangelist is not, I assure you, above slipping in so small and subtle a detail as this in order to mess with our minds. Whatever Mary was thinking, the Evangelist suggests her action goes beyond even the acclamation of a king. The fragrance that honors the majesty of the King *fills the house* as the Lord’s glory filled the

temple. After all, we have already heard in this Gospel that Jesus' body will be the new temple, the dwelling place of God where God is honored and worshipped (John 2:18-22). We have already seen Jesus take to himself the most holy name of the God of Israel: "Before Abraham was, I AM" (John 8:56-59). We have seen how the people picked up stones with which to stone him when he said, "I and my Father are one" (John 10:29-31).

At the same time, Mary's gesture also honors Jesus as the Word *made flesh*, the Son of God who has come to share our mortal life. That's Jesus' interpretation; his words would be better translated: "Leave her alone; she has kept this to prepare me for burial" (John 12:7). According to Jesus, then, Mary's act prophesied and honored *his coming death*; she was acting out in advance the ritual that readied the bodies of the dead for an honorable burial. And of course, she did so with crazy abandon, as though nothing was too much to celebrate and glorify this man who is soon to die.

What was happening there in that dining room in Bethany, under the very noses of Jesus' enemies, was therefore something very great and holy indeed, a deep thing with many layers of meaning. The raising of Lazarus bore witness that in Jesus the life-giving Word of the Father had come near. Now the incarnate Word begins to be acknowledged. Still without proper words, in Mary's actions there is trembling on the verge of speech what Thomas will confess directly after the Resurrection in the presence of the wounded and risen Jesus: "My Lord and my God!"

And now, having brought us to these heights, the Evangelist proceeds directly to drop us in a bucket of cold water. A voice speaks up: "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" What a cold yet seemingly reasonable question! It suggests so persuasively an entirely different way of reading the situation: "Silly woman, all emotions and no sense, what a lot of self-indulgent drama! Doesn't she appreciate how much that stuff *costs*? We could have sold it and done so much real practical good with it! What a waste!"

Let me tell you, my friends, all through the history of the interpretation of this text, Christian commentators have found it very tempting to agree. One ancient preacher said that what Jesus really meant is that Judas shouldn't have jumped on her so, even though he was basically right. He should have been patient with

her while her faith matured. Then she would understand the value of real, practical good works – uh, like Judas? Oh.

We seem to have this problem with Mary of Bethany. *Jesus approves of her more than we do.* In Luke, as you recall, Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to his word while her sister Martha is getting dinner ready. Martha comes stalking up to Jesus, bristling with indignation, and says: "Make her come and help me!" Preachers throughout history have really wanted to say that Martha was right, or at least just as right as Mary. We don't want to discourage people from volunteering for church suppers, after all! Surely Jesus needs his Marthas just as much as his Maries!

But that isn't, as a matter of fact, how Jesus saw it: "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion that will not be taken away from her." It's a kindly rebuke, but it's definitely a rebuke. Mary has it right: while Jesus is there, sitting at his feet and listening to his word is the right choice, not hustle and bustle however well-intended.

In our Lesson, we meet up with something much worse than Martha's exasperation, something very cold and yet so very, very persuasive. We've heard similar things from much nicer people this past week: "If that man from Argentina is really all that humble he should just sell off all those expensive vestments and artworks and give the money to the poor" – as though all the treasures of the Vatican would be enough to buy a one-time cup of coffee for the world's poor.

It is not a bit easy to come to terms with the fact that the one who speaks out for the poor here is *Judas*, the betrayer. It is not at all easy to say that Judas is wrong and Mary is right – even though that is exactly what Jesus says. Indeed, Jesus' own words sound so much less caring than Judas's: "The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me." A little callous there, maybe, Lord Jesus?

It's almost as though the Evangelist knows how we are likely to react, because he takes great pains to remind us that this voice speaking out for the poor is *Judas, people!* You know, the one who's about to sell Jesus to his enemies? This man does not care for the poor, he's a thief, what he cares about is keeping the

money coming in. He's like the hired shepherd that Jesus was just talking about just a couple of chapters ago, who doesn't care about the sheep because he's in it for the money. He's a thief, the kind that comes "to steal and kill and destroy."

To understand what's going on here, we need to think again about Mary's action. It seems extravagant, over the top, and maybe it was. Was it a good thing to do anyway? Was it a good way to honor Jesus? An old Lutheran commentator, a student of Luther and Melancthon, helped me out here. There are some actions, he said, that are just wrong, and you can't do those things to the glory of God. Embezzling money and giving it to the church does not glorify God. Then there are other things which we are simply commanded to do and ought to do. We are commanded to worship God, and that means honoring Jesus. That's not optional. We are also commanded to give to the needy. That's not optional either.

But there is a third class of actions, this old commentator said. There are what he called *the actions of the free spirit*, that is, the spirit set free by the grace of God. Actions like these are in accord with the commandments, but they keep the commandments *extravagantly*, beyond the minimum. They are the actions of people are no longer calculating and measuring in their obedience to God. They come from the generosity of those who are confident in God.

So yes, Mary's extravagant action *was* a good action. It was, as we have seen, an act of worship and confession of Jesus. But it went *way* beyond the minimum. It came from a liberated spirit, a woman who was no longer counting or calculating. She saw Jesus, her teacher, the man who brought her brother back from the grave, she saw him threatened and despised, and her heart overflowed and she took the ointment and just poured it out.

Old Caspar Cruciger, the Lutheran commentator I mentioned, made a wonderful connection at this point. Mary's extravagant act when Jesus came to dinner, he said, was like King David's over-the-top response when the Ark of the Lord came back to Jerusalem. "David danced before the Lord with all his might," we are told, and his wife Michal, the daughter of King Saul, "looked out of the window and saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD, and she despised him in her heart" (2Sa 6:16 ESV).

David dances like a fool when the Ark, the sign of God's presence, comes into the city; Mary pours out a pound of outrageously expensive ointment when Jesus, the Incarnate God, comes to dinner. Mary is despised by Judas, the betrayer of Jesus; David is despised by the daughter of Saul, the man who had tried and failed to kill him. In both David and Mary we see the spirit set free, set free to love and celebrate without clutching and calculating and worrying about what people will think.

Now, let's think about the poor again. *Who do you think the beggars in Bethany were excited to see coming down the street*, Mary, who pours out treasure for the Lord Jesus, or Judas, who knows what Mary's gesture cost but has no clue what it was worth? If you were in trouble, who would be more likely to show up at your door? Mary – or Judas? If you were in trouble, who would you *want* showing up at your door? Mary – or Judas?

When we think about this story, in relation to the poor, it should bring to mind a basic sort of Lutheran point. The main question about good works, Luther always said, is not what works we should do; no, the first question is “How do we get people who are *capable* of good works?” You can have a law, even God's own law, you can have a plan, you can have a cost-benefit analysis that outlines the most efficient ways of helping the needy – but if the only hearts you have to put the plan into action are Judas-hearts, cold hearts, calculating hearts, then God will not be glorified and the neighbor will only be helped by accident. Real help for the needy comes from crazy people, extravagant people, people who will lavish time and attention on the most unlikely persons.

Sometimes God calls forth that sort of generosity from natural kind-heartedness and good spirits. But more often than our culture likes to think, it comes from people who are crazy about Jesus, people whose love for the needy is bound up with their extravagant celebration of the crucified Bridegroom of Israel.

The compassion of cold hearts is always a disappointment. The last century saw cold-hearted, calculating compassion triumphant all around the world. Bloody revolutions broke out and tyrannical regimes were established all over the world in the name of justice for the poor. Stifling compassion bureaucracies grew and stagnated, kept alive only by the frustrated generous hearts which still persist in struggling within them. Care for those in need has been left to the professionals, and many Christian congregations have come to believe that their

obligation to the needy can be fulfilled by writing checks for people they never see.

I'm not here to practice social criticism, and I'm certainly not here to scold. What I will say is this: the distinctive thing the *Church* has to offer the poor and needy is *crazy people* – people like extravagant Mary and dancing David. What the Church has to give the world is *always* Jesus, and people whose lives are tied up with Jesus, people who are crazy *about him*. The Maries and Davids, the Mother Teresas and Cardinal Bergoglios, the known and unknown Christian pastors and people of this city who for centuries have gone out to meet the poor and strange and troubled out of love for Jesus, the poorest man of all – these people are the gift the Church has to give the poor. They are the salt that Jesus talked about, whose presence holds off the decay and rot that threaten every good endeavor in a fallen world. And what is special about them, the *only* thing that is special about them, is that they are crazy, sometimes a lot crazy, sometimes maybe only a little crazy, but crazy *about Jesus*.

In the end, then, the only thing I have to say as preacher today is: “Look, there is Jesus!” There is the Word made flesh, there is the Bridegroom of Israel, there is the Man who is about to die for you. I don't have a plan. I don't know how to end poverty and need in the world. I don't know what you should do in your own life to serve and help the needy. All I know to say is: Look, there is Jesus!

Take a long, long look at him this Lent and Passion- and Easter-tide. See the majesty and the holiness and the love. Let go of the fear and worry and lack of hope that so often make us hesitant about him. Don't worry about what Judas and Michal and even much nicer people might think. Let yourself go at least a little crazy. And then, you know, I'm sure that *something* will occur to you that would be worth doing – probably a lot of somethings, most of them uncomfortable, but all of them worth it because *that* man, *Jesus*, is Lord.

To him together with the Father and the Holy Spirit be all honor and glory, all the generosity and dancing of our hearts, now and unto the ages of ages. Amen.