

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Pour It All Out

John 12:1-11

Thank goodness for Yankee Candle. One of their fragrances came in mighty handy earlier this week during my worship gathering with the children in our day care ministry. "Caramel Apple" was the aroma that filled the sanctuary as the boys and girls entered to offer praise. As they came down the aisle, "Oh How I Love Jesus" played sweetly in the background. It was a multisensory experience, much like the gathering described in this morning's Scripture passage from the Gospel of John.

In this case, they even have the element of taste. It's dinnertime at a house in Bethany. Lazarus is the center of attention. His appetite is back to normal. In fact, everything about Lazarus is back to normal, though it's certainly a "new normal." Remember that thanks to Jesus, Lazarus is now out of the tomb and back at the family table. He'll never again be known as just Lazarus. He'll always be Lazarus, "whom Jesus raised from the dead."

Speaking of empty tombs, it's just two weeks until Easter. I'm sure I'm not the first to announce that to you. The store shelves have already been proclaiming it for awhile. As usual, cheery cards, marshmallow bunnies, and chocolate-covered peanut butter eggs got a head start on us here in the church. But remember that the gospel according to your favorite department store won't say nearly as much, if anything, about the reality of death that always precedes the giving of new life. That's why we, in the life of the church, can't talk about the resurrection without also talking about the crucifixion. For us, the journey to the empty tomb always passes through the cross.

Even at the "Welcome Back, Lazarus" party, the reality of the cross is in the air. True, the room is filled with the aroma of life. But the smell of death is present too. According to John, opposition to Jesus is intensifying among some of the religious leaders. In fact, tensions have only increased now that lots of people have flocked to Jesus following the raising of Lazarus. So behind the scenes, plans are being devised to eliminate both Jesus and Lazarus.

Jesus himself is under no illusions about what's coming. He knows that his hour is on its way. When Mary anoints him with perfume, Jesus says that what she is doing anticipates the anointing of his body at burial. This kind of talk makes for a very strange type of gathering. While most people at the party are celebrating Lazarus's release from the tomb, Jesus is busy talking about how he is headed for the tomb. Like I said, the room is filled with both the aroma of life and the smell of death.

The presence of death is accentuated by the presence of Judas, who will be instrumental in handing Jesus over to the authorities. It's hard to think of Judas without thinking of betrayal. But even before we get to that point in the story, serious questions are being raised about his motives and his agenda. On the surface, his words sound like a reasonable objection to wastefulness. "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor. It was worth a year's wages" (v. 5). At first, the principle sounds similar to a point that

writer Laura Vanderkam made a few years ago in a piece about how couples often stress the wedding event over marriage itself. Vanderkam wrote:

The \$5,251 the average couple spends on rings could be viewed as 105 nights of paying \$50 to a babysitter so you can have uninterrupted conversation or neck in your car like teenagers. The average \$11,000-plus wedding reception bill could cover a cleaning service for the five sticky years many two-kid couples spend in [the] baby stage—when children spill milk just to see what will happen. The \$1,240 brides spend on average to buy (and preserve) their dress and veil and shoes could cover 48 weeks of a laundry service The average \$1,276 flower bill could be doled out as 127 \$10 thinking-of-you bouquets offered once-a-month [for a decade].¹

Isn't there something to be said for simplicity over extravagance, especially when resources can be directed toward something more worthwhile and long-lasting? That seems to be Judas' concern. But this is where John jumps in as narrator of the story and says that benevolence toward the needy isn't really the main thing on Judas's mind. Instead, John paints Judas as an unfaithful disciple whose compassion for the poor is actually just a cover for embezzlement.

"Leave her alone," Jesus says to Judas. "She's anticipating and honoring the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you. You don't always have me."² Like I said earlier, Jesus interprets Mary's act as a sign of what's ahead for him. In fact, it's not just ahead for him. It's already happening to him. Death is already showing up in the days leading up to his crucifixion. In one sense, he's already as good as dead. He's a "dead man walking," as others have noted.

Even so, isn't it good that Mary is showing Jesus her love and gratitude before he's actually dead. It reminds me of how folks will sometimes say, "Give me my flowers now. Don't wait until I'm dead and gone." Even Kanye West has rapped the same basic sentiment in his "Big Brother" lyrics: "If you admire someone you should go 'head tell 'em, / People never get the flowers when they can still smell 'em." In this case, Jesus, and everyone else in the room, got something they could certainly smell, a fragrance that said thank you. A fragrance that preached the word of life by acknowledging our Lord's impending death.

For you see, by pouring the perfume on Jesus, Mary is actually proclaiming the gospel. She's announcing his death, not in the traditional form of a sermon or a verbal witness, but through a gesture of extravagant generosity. I think that in her own mind, Mary saw what she was doing as a way of showing deep and profound gratitude to Jesus for restoring her brother to life. But in the course of saying thank you, Mary ended up doing even more. She ended up preaching the cross.

That's part of what we do when we take our own lives and pour them out to Jesus. We empty ourselves in grateful response to the one who has emptied himself for us, so that we could be children of God and live in intimate union with the Father.

Pastor Janet Hunt tells about an experience in her family's life that fixed itself in her mind: She says:

My dad was sick. We were deep into the long, hot summer after his first surgery and his recovery was, to put it simply, not going well.

Several of us were home to visit. Daddy sat up in his recliner—his legs stretched out, swollen still from where they had removed the veins for his heart bypass surgery. The rest of us were settled in around the room, running out of things to say to fill the silence. It was impossible to

ignore the illness that was ever present among us now. I expect it was why we had gathered then.

It was in the midst of that long silence that my sister, Martha, suddenly jumped up and left the room. When she returned, she carried a bottle of hand lotion. She knelt before my dad's outstretched legs, poured the lotion into her hands and warmed it before ever so gently rubbing it into his tortured limbs. . . .

The cheap hand lotion my sister used that summer's day had little earthly value, but the gesture was the same: borne of a deep love and courageous acknowledgement of the struggle which permeated our time together then. I would not venture to guess that she was acknowledging the actual nearing of the end of his life here. I've never asked. Still, it was a visual turning point of a reversal of roles in our family. After that, it was true that nothing was to be quite the same again. Whatever else it was, it was certainly a tender gesture which pointed to the profound value that one life had for all of us. And in that moment, there seemed nothing else to do.³

That's one of the things about Mary's act of anointing Jesus. It's so in the moment, so spontaneous, so uncalculated. It reminds me of an experience a friend recently described to me. He and some others from his church were on a mission trip, serving in an impoverished part of Appalachia, devoting most of their time to home repair and improvement. A woman whose house they were working on asked them how their food had been during the week. They replied, unenthusiastically, that it had been okay. After all, their menu so far had consisted mainly of pasta and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. So the next day, when they arrived at the woman's house, they were amazed to find that she had killed one of her own chickens, and had prepared fried chicken for dinner. In view of what little she had, it was a costly and generous gift, an extravagant expression of gratitude and love.

In a similar way, Mary sees what's right in front of her, sees the one who's right in front of her, and gives of herself with abandon and affection. In this respect, John wants to give us a picture of what it means to live in a relationship of love with Jesus. He wants us to see what faithful discipleship looks like. And one of the ways John does this is by showing us what faithful discipleship doesn't look like. In this case, it doesn't look like what we see in Judas. In other words, discipleship that's cool, calculating, and crafty. Discipleship that's austere and stingy.

Mary, by contrast, relates to Jesus with a certain in the moment generosity, to the point of extravagance and apparent excess. Rather than holding back, she opens herself up and pours herself out, giving abundantly to the one who has come giving the very life of God in abundance. By emptying himself, pouring himself out for us in his death, Jesus brings us into restored, life-giving relationship with God. So to be a disciple, to be in this relationship with God, means taking your life and spending it, generously, extravagantly, and sacrificially, for the sake of Christ, to the benefit of others.

In the story and film, *Babette's Feast*, two elderly and pious sisters live in a small village on the western coast of Denmark. Their father was a pastor who founded a strict and austere religious community that has dwindled over time due to no new converts. At present, the aging congregation is going through a difficult time of bickering and division. One day, a talented chef named Babette shows up at the sisters' door as a refugee from political turmoil in Paris. She carries a letter of recommendation from a suitor one of the sisters had previously known. The sisters can't afford to take Babette in for free, so she offers to work as a housekeeper. For fourteen years, Babette prepares meals for them. All the meals are in keeping with the religious community's spirit of austerity and self-denial.

One day Babette learns that she has won the lottery in Paris. Instead of returning to the city and using the money to enjoy her lost lifestyle, she decides to spend the wealth to prepare a magnificent feast for the sisters and the entire congregation, on the occasion of what would have been their father's one hundredth birthday. The meal is more than just a feast. It's an outpouring of her appreciation, an act of sacrifice. She tells no one that she has spent her entire winnings on the meal.

Though the congregation has agreed to the meal, they've also determined that they'll take no great pleasure in all the rich, sensual, and satisfying delicacies that fill the table. And yet, even though they're very restrained in their reaction to the feast, something happens during the course of their gathering. Wounds in their religious community get healed. Old arguments get dropped. Suspicions and mistrust get put aside. Past misdeeds get forgiven. Camaraderie gets revived. Love for one another gets rekindled. And when the evening is finished, they join hands and sing the doxology under the stars.

Only then do the sisters discover what Babette had actually done. She hadn't just spent a portion of the money, as they had thought. Babette had spent all the money on that meal. In doing so, she had foreclosed her own options. She could now never return to Paris and take a post at one of the world's top restaurants. In the best sense of the word, Babette had "wasted" it all, given it away extravagantly to the sisters and their community. And in doing so, Babette's self-emptying had brought life.

God's self-giving love in Christ isn't stingy. No, Jesus has poured it all out for us. And Mary shows us that we ourselves point to his death, and to the life that comes through it, when we give ourselves with extravagant generosity to the Lord and to others.

¹ Laura Vanderkam, "What Else Could That Ring Buy?" *USA Today* (February 10, 2010).

² Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary English* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993) 214.

³ Janet H. Hunt, "On Costly Nard and Cheap Hand Lotion." *Dancing with the Word* website. March 10, 2013. Accessed March 10, 2016 <<http://words.dancingwiththeword.com/2013/03/on-costly-nard-and-cheap-hand-lotion.html>>.