

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **The Aroma of Devotion**

John 12:1-11

When is Easter? That's a question I've heard others asking recently, including some folks in the church. We sense that Easter is near, but occasionally we need some help to pin it down on the calendar. Yet rest assured that though we may not always remember the date of Easter, Hallmark knows. When one of their advertising brochures arrived in the mail this week, the bar at the top announced, "Easter is Sunday, April 17." Inside were offers for cards, ornaments, frames, mugs, tote bags, and T-Shirts. And my personal favorite—a cute fuzzy chick that lays plastic eggs while bobbing and playing a parody of "Rapper's Delight."

On the back page, next to the coupons, was a buy one, get one free offer for scented candles. Fragrance options included peach flower, spring bouquet, and tropical escape. If you step into a Hallmark store anytime between now and Easter, you can probably experience the aromas firsthand.

When you step into today's text from John, it's impossible to miss the smell that fills the room. Not because Martha has been shopping at the Hallmark store in Bethany, but because Mary has poured out a gift to Jesus. Right in the middle of a dinner gathering given in Jesus' honor, Mary herself gives, extravagantly, sacrificially. She takes a pound of expensive perfume and pours it on Jesus' feet. This is no delicate scent, carefully formulated in a Yankee Candle laboratory. It's a strong, overpowering smell that takes over the space where family and friends have gathered. It's an earthy aroma. A woody, spicy scent. There's no way you could be in the room and miss it.

Judas certainly doesn't miss it. He immediately speaks up, protesting what he views as Mary's wastefulness. She's been part of the community of Jesus' followers long enough to know that simplicity of life and care for the poor are basic to his agenda. Instead of taking this pricy oil and dumping it on Jesus' feet, why not sell it and use the money to provide for others who don't have food, clothing, and shelter? At first, this sounds like a reasonable request from the person who was in charge of managing the fellowship's benevolence fund. Anyone who's a disciple of Jesus knows that stewardship matters. Providing for the needy matters. But according to John, there are things that matter more to Judas than stewardship and benevolence, namely, personal financial gain and self-preservation.

This is such a contrast to the self-giving and self-emptying that goes on between Mary and Jesus. Rather than keeping the perfume for herself, Mary broke the seal on the jar and poured it out. That's a year's wages, used up in matter of minutes. But Mary knows there's something more precious in the room—Jesus himself, and the love he has for his followers, and the love that they, including Mary, have for him. Mary shows her love lavishly, and even uses her hair to wipe the oil on Jesus' feet. Her devotion to the Lord is beyond calculation. Her gratitude and adoration are priceless.

Mary's act of devotion is also so in the moment. She's so present to Jesus, and he to her. She sees the opportunity to give, and seizes it. It reminds me of an experience a friend once 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.

Being a disciple of Jesus looks like Jesus. Not just the Jesus who has taught about the kingdom, fed the multitudes, healed the sick, and raised the dead, but also the Jesus who is now headed toward his own death. The one who called for Lazarus to come out of the grave is now on the way to his own grave, and Mary's act of devotion points in that direction. So when Judas criticizes her, Jesus says, "Leave her alone. It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me" (vv. 7-8). Jesus isn't telling them not to worry about the poor. He's simply telling them that his time with them is limited. The opportunity for them to respond to his presence is now. And that's exactly what Mary does. She acts, with selflessness and sacrifice. And soon Jesus will do the same, for the redemption of the world. At the time of his burial, Jesus will be anointed. But even now, Mary is giving everyone a preview.

Mary may also be giving us a preview of another scene in Jesus' path to the cross. In the very next chapter, Jesus will wash the feet of his disciples as an expression of his love for them, as a way of drawing them into his life with God. He'll also tell them to repeat this act of loving service for one another. So what Jesus does for his disciples, and asks them to do for one another, Mary has done for him. In this way, Mary models the life of discipleship, the life of love, a life that embraces Jesus, not just in his life but especially in his death.

Jeffrey Collins tells about an experience he had while serving at a ministry called Love & Action. It was five o'clock on a Friday. Jeff was looking forward to a quiet dinner with some friends, when the phone rang:

"Jeff! It's Jimmy!" I heard a quivering voice say. Jimmy, who suffered from several AIDS-related illnesses, was one of our regular clients. "I'm really sick, Jeff. I've got a fever. Please help me."

I was angry. After a 60-hour workweek, I didn't want to hear about Jimmy. But I promised to be right over. Still, during the drive, I complained to God about the inconvenience.

The moment I walked in the door, I could smell the vomit. Jimmy was on the sofa, shivering and in distress. I wiped his forehead, then got a bucket of soapy water to clean up the mess. I managed to maintain a facade of concern, even though I was raging inside.

Jimmy's friend, Russ, who also had AIDS, came down the stairs. The odor made Russ sick, too.

As I cleaned the carpet around Russ's chair, I was ready to explode inside. Then Russ startled me. "I understand! I understand!"

"What, Russ?" Jimmy asked weakly.

"I understand who Jesus is," Russ said through tears. "He's like Jeff!" Weeping, I hugged Russ and prayed with him. That night Russ trusted Jesus Christ as his personal Savior—a God who had used me to show his love in spite of myself.<sup>1</sup>

Even though his attitude wasn't the greatest, Jeff had gotten down into the odor of suffering and sorrow, and released the aroma of life, and in the process became an image of what discipleship looks like. His servanthood became a witness in which others could see the Savior who washes feet and gives himself on the cross.

In 2008, actress Gwyneth Paltrow launched a weekly e-mail newsletter called Goop. A website was eventually added, and then Goop expanded into e-commerce. Today Goop is a wellness and lifestyle brand whose beauty products include scented candles. One of these is called "Edition 01 – Church." It even comes in a bottle of perfume. The product description says: "This is a scent of cypress smoke, snow, and a sexy sense of quiet. Resins of red cedar and labdanum spike a mix of cypress root, frankincense, clove-leaf oil, and helichrysum flower for a perfume that evokes a crackling fire, a cypress grove by the sea, and the centuries-old floorboards of an ancient European chapel." Sounds interesting, though it might be simpler just to stick with Hallmark. That last phrase is what catches my attention. "The centuries-old floorboards of an ancient European chapel." In other words, it smells like church. At least what some people think of when they think of church.

Church smells can vary. Many people associate churches with old or musty scents. The age of many church buildings, combined with poor circulation, can contribute to this type of smell. Some churches, particularly ones that include incense, oils, and candles in their worship, create an aroma that aids the sense of being in a different kind of space, in the presence of God.

Here at Grace Baptist Church, we're probably not known for any particular scent. We've occasionally introduced scented candles in the vestibule, to help create a sense of warmth, comfort, and welcome. In the days before COVID, the primary scent in our building may have come from the food that filled our fellowship hall tables once a month. There's nothing quite like that experience of exiting the sanctuary and being met by the smell of fried chicken and casseroles. We greatly miss those days.

But that doesn't mean there's no scent in this church. At all times, in all circumstances, this place is meant to be filled with the aroma of devotion. That's what we see in Mary, and that's what should be seen in us. Mary shows us what it means to be one of Jesus' own. She shows us that true discipleship is about personal devotion to Jesus expressed in acts of love. Love toward one another in the community of Jesus' followers, and love beyond this fellowship in the world.

This love isn't calculating or half-hearted. It's generous and sacrificial. It's not about holding yourself back but pouring yourself out. It's not about what you can gain but what you can give up. It's about giving boldly of yourself to Jesus, just as Jesus has given boldly of himself to you, most of all on the cross. That's where Jesus released the fragrance of forgiveness and life into a world filled with sin and death. And that fragrance spreads among us as we let go of our lives and give them to Jesus. That way, when you and others enter this space, the aroma of devotion will be unmistakable.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Collins, "It Happened on a Friday." *Christian Reader* (March/April 1998) Vol. 36, No. 2.