

## A PROPHETIC ACT

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

John 12:1-8

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It was six days before the Passover and Jesus was heading to Jerusalem when he stopped at the town of Bethany to see Mary, Martha and their brother, Lazarus. Clearly, he wanted to see them before he entered Jerusalem for what he knew would be the last time. We don't exactly know how or when their friendship began, but by the time Mary, Martha and Lazarus are mentioned in the Gospels their friendship with Jesus had already established. The three of them were dear to Jesus, and Jesus was dear to them. They called him Lord, so they knew who he was, but they were not his disciples, or at least not in the formal sense of those whom Jesus had called and who had been following him for the past three years.

Not long before this last visit there had been another visit, a visit initiated by a letter the sisters wrote saying, **"Lord, he whom you love is ill"** (John 11:3). At that time, Jesus left a location on the other side of the Jordan River, a place that was a safer place for him to teach and heal. As he crossed the river and headed to Bethany, a village close to Jerusalem, he not only knew that he would not make it before Lazarus died, but he also knew the danger level for himself would increase. When he arrived in Bethany, Mary and Martha were grieving their brother who had died four days earlier. At that time, Jesus the man wept in front of his friend's tomb, and then Jesus the Messiah shouted for him to come out of it. Lazarus was miraculously restored to life.

So as Jesus returns one more time to see his friends, the chief priests are hot on his trail. You see, chatting with the Samaritan woman was one thing and healing the blind on the Sabbath another, but reviving a corpse was something else altogether. Such an act had sky-rocketed Jesus' popularity while also increasing the fear level of the religious authorities. **Efforts to arrest Jesus with the intention of having him put to death increased significantly following Jesus' raising of Lazarus (John 11:45-53).** Jesus knows that his days are numbered as he arrives at the house of his friends this second time. Apparently, Mary, Martha and Lazarus quickly notice that Jesus is weighed down. So, they welcome him into their home, and they care for him, and they make every effort to shut out the world for at least one night.

As usual, Martha is in charge of making dinner, and Mary has slipped away. Martha is used to Mary disappearing or becoming distracted when there is work to be done. It's happened before. Finally, supper is on the table, and they all sit down or more likely they recline at the table since that was the typical position in that day for eating and talking, resting and sharing stories. Lazarus reclines near his friend and Lord. I wonder to what extent Lazarus sensed the nearing danger. He had certainly been hearing things in the community since Jesus had brought him back to life. As long as Jesus kept some distance between himself and the reach of those in Jerusalem who wanted to arrest and put him to death, he was more or less safe. However, returning to Bethany, put his life in greater danger, and entering Jerusalem will allow the net to be drawn in around him.

Martha is serving dinner, and Lazarus, Jesus and the other disciples are all eating when Mary shows up holding a slender clay jar in her hands. Without a word she kneels at Jesus' feet and breaks the neck of the jar. The room would have filled with the smell of spikenard which is a strong scent described as smelling something like mint and ginseng. As everyone in the room watched her, she does four very unexpected things.

**First, she loosens her hair in a room full of men;** this was something a respectable woman never did. **Secondly, she pours the balm from the clay jar on Jesus' feet** which was also not done – the head, maybe, but not the feet. **Thirdly, she touches him,** a woman caressing the feet of a respected teacher and rabbi was simply not done, not even among friends. **And finally, she wipes the scented balm off with her hair.** What she does is totally inexplicable – it is truly shocking, not just for those of us in this century looking back two thousand years, but it was perhaps even more shocking for those who lived in the first century.

Today, most of us are so moved by the scene that we overlook the eccentricities of it. After all, the point is that she loved him, and that's what counts. But we also tend to confuse this account with the other three in the Bible – one each from Matthew, Mark and Luke. In Matthew and Mark, the woman who anoints Jesus is an unnamed woman at Simon the Leper's house who pours spikenard not on Jesus' feet but on his head, and in Luke, the woman is a sinner, supposedly a prostitute who washes Jesus' feet with her tears and covers them with kisses before rubbing them with oil of myrrh.

Only in John's account does the woman not only have a name, Mary, she also has a relationship with Jesus. She is not a stranger or a prostitute; she is a longtime friend – which some might say makes her act even stranger. After all, he knows she loves him. He loves her too. So why this seemingly inappropriate public display of love, this very odd behavior in front everyone? What she has done is extravagant and excessive. She has gone overboard and Judas is quick to say so. **"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (John 12:5).** A day laborer and his family could live a year on that much money, but Mary has wasted it on Jesus' feet of all things – feet that are just going to get dirty as soon as he walks outside. What Judas witnessed was an act of extravagant love, but all he could see was extravagant waste.

**"Leave her alone," says Jesus, "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" (John 12: 7-8).** That statement is almost as odd a thing for Jesus to say as anything that Mary just did. After all, we know that Jesus was a champion of the poor; he made a regular practice of putting their needs ahead of his own needs. But Jesus also knew that sometimes, what is most appropriate and what we need most is to lavish our attention directly on Jesus. Mary seems to have a sense that this is her last chance to express love and devotion to Jesus, and she is not about to be filled with regret because she failed to act.

Whatever anyone else in that room thought about what Mary was doing, Jesus understood it as a message from God. It was not the act of a woman who

was not thinking straight, but the act of a prophet. In fact, everything was touched with significance. There was Judas, the betrayer, challenging her act of extravagant love. There was the flask of spikenard that may well have been left over from Lazarus' funeral. And out in the yard, there was a freshly vacated tomb that still smelled of burial spices, waiting for a new occupant. The air was heavy with death, and Mary's actions highlighted that truth to everyone in that room.

**By way of a prophetic act, Mary was anointing Jesus for his burial.**

And while her behavior may have seemed strange to those standing around, it was not stranger than that of the prophets who went before her – like Ezekiel, who ate the scroll of the Lord as a sign that he carried the word of God inside of him. It was not stranger than Isaiah, who walked around Jerusalem naked and barefoot as a sign against the nations. Prophets do strange things; they act out the truth that others don't seem to see or don't want to see. When Mary stood before Jesus with a pound of costly perfume, for a moment – just a moment – it could have gone a different way. She could have anointed his head and everyone there would have happily proclaimed him a king. But she did not do that. Instead, she dropped to her knees and poured the balm on his feet, which meant only one thing. The only man who got his feet anointed was a dead man.

So, Mary proceeded to rub his feet with perfume so precious that its sale might have fed a family for a year; it was an act so lavish that it suggests an even deeper meaning to her prophetic act. For there will be nothing frugal about the death of this man, just as there has been nothing frugal about his life. **In Jesus, the extravagance of God's love is made flesh – the excessiveness of God's mercy is made known – the river of God's grace flows freely.**

This bottle will not be held back to be kept and admired like an expensive bottle of wine that is locked away in some wine cellar. No, this precious substance, this life of Jesus will not be saved. It will be opened, offered, and used at great cost. Jesus will be raised up, broken and poured out for all humankind; he will be fully emptied of life, to the very last drop. The storm is brewing in the distance, and Mary has given them the forecast. It will be bad, very bad, but they must not lock up their hearts and head for the cellar.

**Whatever they need, there will be enough to go around, for there is nothing frugal, nothing stingy about the love of God revealed and poured out through Jesus.**

Mary got that message, and she acted on it. Some of those standing by thought her mad or wasteful, but the one whose feet she rubbed knew the truth. When it comes to God, there is no need to fear that we might run out of something as priceless as love, as hope, as life, because through Christ there is always more than we could ever ask or imagine. Still today and right here in this place, our lavishly loving Lord offers to each one of us the life-infused gift of himself.

All who love the Lord, whether you are a member of this church or not, are invited to come and to receive what the Lord so generously offers. Let us enter into a time of preparation as we join together in our prayer of confession...

