

Scripture Reading for April 3, 2022

John 11:45-12:11 (NIV)

⁴⁵ Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. ⁴⁶ But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. ⁴⁷ Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. “What are we accomplishing?” they asked. “Here is this man performing many signs. ⁴⁸ If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation.” ⁴⁹ Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, “You know nothing at all! ⁵⁰ You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.” ⁵¹ He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, ⁵² and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. ⁵³ So from that day on they plotted to take his life.

⁵⁴ Therefore Jesus no longer moved about publicly among the people of Judea. Instead he withdrew to a region near the wilderness, to a village called Ephraim, where he stayed with his disciples. ⁵⁵ When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, many went up from the country to Jerusalem for their ceremonial cleansing before the Passover. ⁵⁶ They kept looking for Jesus, and as they stood in the temple courts they asked one another, “What do you think? Isn’t he coming to the festival at all?” ⁵⁷ But the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who found out where Jesus was should report it so that they might arrest him.

¹ Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ² Here a dinner was given in Jesus’ honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. ³ Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus’ feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

⁴ But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, ⁵ “Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages.” ⁶ He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. ⁷ “Leave her alone,” Jesus replied. “It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. ⁸ You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.”

⁹ Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰ So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, ¹¹ for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and believing in him.

Sermon: “The Price of Everything”¹

Our journey through Lent now approaches Jerusalem and, for some reason, the lectionary switches from Luke to John for this week and focuses on Mary’s anointing of Jesus with expensive perfume. John’s Gospel also provides some context to the upcoming events of that specific Passover. So today we are going to briefly consider the three significant people in the build up to the Easter story, Caiaphas, Judas, and Mary - and what motivated them.

Recall that Jesus has just raised Lazarus from the dead, so demonstrating that God has given Jesus authority to give life.² As you might expect, that act alone caused many who witnessed it to believe in Jesus.³ However, some went to the pharisees and told them what had happened, and *they* then went the 3km from Bethany to Jerusalem to tell the chief priests, who promptly had a meeting of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council. The “Jesus-problem” had become a very serious matter and the religious elite were afraid. “We *can’t* let this go on,” the chief priests exclaim. “If we do, *everyone* will believe in him and, even worse, Romans will come and *take away* both our temple and our nation.”⁴ Their concerns are both *religious* and *political*, but it’s also clear that they perceived Jesus to be a threat to their personal authority and influence. They have a delicate working relationship with the Herod Antipas and Pontius Pilate, and they don’t want that balance upset. They fear this Jesus-movement could grow in popularity and so raise Roman concerns, and perhaps result in a violent backlash that would affect *all* Jews.

John reports that Caiaphas, the High Priest,⁵ spoke up: “Don’t you realize that it’s better that *one man die for the people* than that the whole nation perish.”⁶ First, recognize that he was being cynically pragmatic; killing off Jesus would solve his *political* problem. He sees the death of Jesus as the price of peace and a means to maintain their power. Second, notice that Jesus was *absent* for this trial, judgement, and sentence. Third, realize that Caiaphas is unaware that his words were prophetic and reveal a profound truth to the reader. Earlier in the Gospel, John reports Jesus as saying: “I am the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.”⁷ Jesus apparently understands that was his role and he does so *voluntarily* and at a time of his *choosing*.⁸ The Sanhedrin have an *unwitting* role in bringing about Christ’s death for their own motives. Yet, in light of the resurrection, the early church came to see this perfect storm of the chief priests, Herod, and Pilate as working together – albeit semi-coherently - to bring about what Jesus understood his divine mission to be, which was “to give his life

¹ Borrowing from Oscar Wilde’s famous quip “The cynic knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.”

² See John 5:21-22, 26-27. For John, this event is the trigger whereas the synoptic gospels have the clearing of the temple.

³ John 11:45.

⁴ John 11:48. They were particularly concerned over the effectiveness of Jesus’ miracles (his ‘signs’); John 11:47b.

⁵ He was High Priest from 18-36 CE, i.e., a role usually for life (although at the discretion of the Roman Governor). John’s mention of “that year” in 11:49 is not necessarily referring to an annual (re)appointment, as such, but to the year Jesus died (or his ‘time’). Even so, this mention of “that year” is an ironic reminder of Caiaphas’ tenuous hold on power.

⁶ John 11:50.

⁷ John 10:11, 17-18.

⁸ John 11:54 (see also John 7:6, 30 on timing.) In John’s account Jesus leaves Bethany until the time for Passover.

as a ransom for many.”⁹ The great irony is that the Romans *do* eventually destroy the temple and Jerusalem anyway, something John and his readers knew, and it *wasn't* Jesus' fault but, in part, because of Jewish leadership's own mismanagement of another crisis less than 40 years later.

Pause for a moment. The chief priests speak of “*our* temple” and “*our* nation.”¹⁰ This subtle but significant slip reveals that *God's* temple and people had been replaced by their *own* self-serving interests. The same thing happens today when people, often Christian conservatives, speak of a “Christian nation” and merge their faith with political ambitions. They, like the Sanhedrin, consider themselves to be speaking on *God's* behalf when, again like the Sanhedrin, they have misunderstood Jesus and his message. There is no such thing as a “Christian nation,” it's a persistent myth.¹¹ Jesus later made it clear to Pontius Pilate that his kingdom is *not* a political one and Pilate was convinced,¹² which is why he initially refused to sentence Jesus to death. So let's be watchful for when people, including Christians, try to oppress others in *God's* name or when they justify their own political or legal ambitions by their beliefs. We are to work for the wellbeing and justice of *all*, and not just for those who share our particular worldview.¹³

Moving on, Jesus avoids arrest by staying in the countryside until *he's* ready to enter Jerusalem.¹⁴ Six days before Passover, he returns to Bethany where he is a guest of honor at a meal. Lazarus was there, as were his sisters, Mary and Martha. Something stunning happens, we're told: “Mary took about half a liter of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair.”¹⁵ This scene is often portrayed in movies about Jesus and usually in a salacious way, not least because to publicly wipe a man's feet with her hair would have been socially shocking.¹⁶ Now nard is mentioned numerous times in the Old Testament and is sometimes associated with erotic love, being mentioned twice in the Song of Solomon.¹⁷ Ironically it was also used to anoint the dead, so symbolically John weaves these twin themes of *death* and *love* together in this story. We are told that “the house was *filled* with the fragrance of the aromatic oil,” which gives the impression that this large quantity of perfume is excessive and completely overpowering. You just know that this extraordinary act is bound to provoke a reaction!

⁹ John 13:1; 1:29; (11:51-52); Mark 10:45; Matt 20:28. Jesus' mission is, therefore, non-violent – something the Sanhedrin apparently fail to understand, though are correct in thinking Jesus is the (kingly) Messiah.

¹⁰ John 11:48. At least this is John's interpretation!

¹¹ See Greg Boyd, *The Myth of a Christian Nation* (Zondervan, 2007).

¹² John 18:38b; 19:4, 6b; (see also Luke 23:4, 14, 22.) Pilate would have no hesitation to killing Jesus if he thought Jesus was a genuine threat to Rome's 'peace.'

¹³ God does not need us to protect him or his reputation. Our faith will naturally influence our values and political choices, but let's be wary of those who want to impose their views on others (whatever their religious/philosophical) persuasion. We are to be wise (savvy) and discerning of expediency for narrow, self-serving ends.

¹⁴ John 11:54-57.

¹⁵ John 12:3. (See also John 11:2.) John emphasizes both the *quantity* and the high *quality* of the perfume.

¹⁶ See also Matt 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; (Luke 7:36-50).

¹⁷ Song of Solomon 1:12; 4:13.

Judas Iscariot says: “Why wasn’t this oil sold for 300 silver coins – which was a *year’s* salary - and the money given to the poor?”¹⁸ Understandably, John presents Judas in a negative light because he later betrays Jesus, but Judas is likely the spokesman for a number of the disciples.¹⁹ Let’s run with it anyway, because it’s a fair comment, one that any responsible treasurer might make! Seen in that light, Judas becomes deeply practical and honorably engaged with the issues of social justice. His protest over Mary’s lavish action is grounded in the conviction reflected throughout the New Testament, and certainly in Luke’s gospel, that Christ’s message is good news *for the poor*.²⁰ Moreover, social justice and giving generously to those who are poor were key themes of the Old Testament prophets. Judas, then, was counting the cost and, understandably, saw Mary’s actions as irresponsible and wasteful.

One way to view Judas is to say that he reflects the kind of discipleship that appears to embrace Jesus *for the sake of other* higher, nobler causes. However, in a situation where there is a perceived tension between the *competing* causes of honoring Jesus and serving the needs of the poor, Judas makes it clear where his *highest* loyalty lies. Although concern for the poor is admirable in itself, privileging that good cause above faithfulness to Jesus invites trouble because “you can’t serve two masters.”²¹ What may have started as a virtuous intention is now being corrupted by Judas’ own priorities and self interest. His later actions demonstrate that this following Jesus *for-the-sake-of-some-other-cause* degenerates from self-interest into active *opposition* to Jesus. We should therefore pause and consider *why* we follow Jesus. Is it *for-the-sake-of-some-other-cause*, one that takes precedence over Jesus himself? In churches, we may want our highest allegiance to be to our hallowed buildings, or a particular program or activity, even to a particular theology, with the result that Jesus becomes an instrumental means for generating funds and enthusiasm for our own ends. And when Jesus disappoints us in some way, then we are prone to the temptation of abandoning or even opposing Jesus – just like Judas did.

In contrast, let’s briefly consider Mary’s model of discipleship, which – frankly - *is* wholly impractical and even reckless. Surely, she could have found a more measured stewardship of a year’s wages than this extravagant gesture. Nevertheless Jesus commends her.²² It’s very difficult to justify her action on practical grounds, however it’s clear that this is an outpouring of her love for Jesus who had restored life to her dead brother, Lazarus. In a way, she models the lavish impracticality of Jesus’ own love for the world. Jesus, the incarnate son of God,²³ is on the way to Jerusalem in order to give his life for the reconciliation of the world. Jesus responds to Judas, “Cut her some slack; she has kept it for the day of my burial.”²⁴ What Mary had done was “something beautiful for God.”²⁵ The extravagant devotion of

¹⁸ John 12:5. v6 is John’s added – negative (scapegoating?) - commentary on Judas, portraying him as disingenuous and as a thief. Note: 300 denarii was a year’s wage, when feast days and Sabbaths are taken into account.

¹⁹ cf. Matt 26:8; Mark 14:8 where Judas is *not* specifically mentioned.

²⁰ See Luke 6:20. (Luke has most to say about poverty and wealth, including a number of specific parables.)

²¹ Matt 6:24.

²² John 12:7, cf. Matt 26:10-13; Mark 14:6-9.

²³ See John 1-4, 14.

²⁴ John 12:7. The text is ambiguous and could imply that Mary had saved some for Jesus’ burial (cf. NRSV/NIV/NTE).

²⁵ *Something Beautiful for God* (1971) is the famous book by Malcolm Muggeridge on Mother Theresa.

Mary cannot coexist with the mean spirit that calculates the cost of everything and recognizes the value of nothing.

There is a further important connection we must make for John will soon describe another event that's unique to his Gospel. At the Passover meal just a few days later, Jesus washed the disciples' feet. This vividly illustrates the upside-down nature of the kingdom of God, wherein the master takes the role of the lowest slave. John presents a fair amount of detail to this event²⁶ and concludes with Jesus providing an explanation, saying: "Do you understand what I have done for you? You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and do so correctly, for that is what I am. If, as your Lord and Teacher, I have washed your feet, you too ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example—you should do just as I have done for you."²⁷ This story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet and that of Mary anointing Jesus' feet are connected by *service* and *love*. John introduces the feet-washing Jesus with the following: "Having *loved* his own who were in the world, he now *loved them to the very end*."²⁸ Mary's love for Jesus is extravagant; Jesus' love for the world is also excessive in that he is willing to die to save it. The price of Mary's perfume was exorbitant, a year's wages; but she does not count the cost.²⁹ Jesus' love cost everything. How, do we gauge our own love for Jesus? How do we demonstrate our devotion to Jesus?

Jesus responds to Judas' criticism of Mary's excess, saying: "You will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me!"³⁰ Jesus is *not* being dismissive of those who are poor here. Honoring Jesus and caring for the poor are certainly not mutually exclusive acts. Rather, John has often mentioned the work of Jesus in the context of *time*, and Jesus is aware that "his time has come."³¹ In saying "but you will not always have me," it's a reminder to his disciples to make good use of the time that is available, and, in praising Mary, Jesus is saying that she has used *this moment in time* appropriately, not least in that she is preparing Jesus for his upcoming burial.³²

In conclusion, we have considered three people's values and how they each counted the cost. Caiaphas was cynical; Judas only saw dollar signs – both were pragmatic and motivated ultimately by self-interest. Mary was different; she was impulsive and excessively generous because of her love for Jesus. How do *we* count the cost or measure value? I suggest we are to show our love for God through caring for those who are poor or marginalized, but we can *also* show our devotion through seemingly wasted moments like Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet with priceless perfume.³³ Much of modern religion focuses

²⁶ John 13:1-17. Note that the verb "to wipe" is the same as in John 12:3, so connecting these two events.

²⁷ John 13:12b-15 (see also v16-17).

²⁸ John 13:1. "to the very end" can also be translated "completely" or "to the utmost." The same Greek root word is part of the Jesus' cry on the cross: "It is finished/completed" (John 19:30).

²⁹ Not just financially, but also in terms of her self-respect and social standing.

³⁰ John 12:8; cf. Deut 15:11.

³¹ See, for example, John 7:6; 12:23-34; 13:1; 17:1.

³² John 12:7b.

³³ The complaint is often made that churches spend too much money on buildings, etc. Wouldn't that money be better spent on caring for the poor. The critique may have validity, especially if a congregation is internally focused and closes itself off from the world. But does life have to be so binary? Rather than an either/or vision, why not a both/and response to Jesus?

only on what is useful, practical, and cost-effective. Yet there's surely also a place for reverence, beauty, and creativity, as well as for special moments to be celebrated. Over-flowing generosity is one of John's themes, beginning with the wedding of Cana.³⁴ Wherever Jesus is present there is abundance. While we can't justify wasting God's gifts, God is not stingy! Therefore, let our love for the master be whole-hearted and generous. Amen. Let us pray.

³⁴ See John 2:11-11; <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Gods-Gracious-Extravagance.pdf> .