

**COSTLY DEVOTION©**

John 12:1-8

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It is six days now, before the Passover Feast. Jesus knows his time is getting very close. It is dangerous for him to be out, traveling around Jerusalem, especially after the amazing thing he did just before this time in raising Mary and Martha's brother, Lazarus, from the dead. That was the last straw for the temple leaders! They were determined to have him arrested.

But Jesus has been invited to Bethany, which is only a couple of miles outside of Jerusalem, to share a meal with his dear friends. The meal very likely is given in his honor. After all, if it weren't for him, Lazarus would be dead. Jesus had turned this family's sorrow and weeping into great joy.

It must have been quite a meal and probably was rather crowded in the room, with Jesus and all the disciples there at the table. We can assume they were all there because Judas was certainly present. And we are told that Lazarus is at the table with them. Martha, of course, is busy serving.

We know from the story in Luke 10:38-42 that Martha is the busy one of the sisters. She is the one who sees the work that needs to be done and she can't sit down for a minute. There's nothing wrong with that, of course. Martha gives her gift of serving, her gift of hospitality. It is the way she shows love and devotion.

The only fault we might find in Martha is that she thinks Mary should be the same way she is ... busy working and getting things done. We might wonder, too, if Martha ever has the time to just sit and take in the wonderful presence of Jesus. Does she ever, after he is gone, think "it all went too fast. I didn't ever get to talk to him"? Luke says she is "distracted."

Most of us women can relate to Martha in that way. We invite family over for a holiday meal or a family celebration, but it seems the time flies by and suddenly they are all gone, and we realize we spent the whole time in the kitchen, trying to make sure everything was ready in time.

Well, Mary ... Martha's sister ... was different. Mary was the one who showed her devotion by sitting at Jesus feet, letting all the work wait (or letting her sister do it, if she was willing).

But on this night, Mary does something quite unusual. We aren't told why she has this expensive perfume – just that she has it (we could speculate that perhaps she had used it to anoint her brother in his death).

Mary has almost a pint of this pure nard that is worth a whole years wages! That is some costly perfume! Today it would be one of those that only the very rich would have ... who knows where you would purchase it? The Harper's Bible Dictionary calls it *Spikenard* and says it is a "scented ointment or perfume imported from the Himalayas in alabaster boxes and opened on special occasions."

Keep in mind that women did not touch spiritual leaders in that day. Women also kept their hair tied up on their heads, unless they were women of ill repute. And women were not to be the center of attention in a room full of men.

Martha ... she was serving the meal. She was taking her place as a respectable woman.

But Mary ... Mary was overcome with emotion. Her love and affection for Jesus, especially now, after what he did for her brother and her family ... Mary could not help herself.

In spite of all the reasons not to do it, Mary walked into the room where Jesus was lounging at the table with Lazarus and the disciples. She seemed oblivious to those around her. She only cared about showing devotion to Jesus.

She knelt down and took this expensive perfume and poured it ... not over his head, as most would do for an anointing, but she poured it over his feet ... as if she were a servant girl, washing the feet of the guest who had traveled far.

Little did she or Jesus' disciples know that in a few days, at the Passover celebration, Jesus himself ... their teacher, their master ... would kneel down in the same way, as a servant, and wash their feet!

We can imagine the shocked silence of the moment – the sweet fragrance of the perfume filling the air, the sound of Mary gently rubbing the oil into Jesus' feet, the swishing noise as her hair falls and she begins wiping his feet with her long hair.

We can imagine how stunned they would have been, because we ourselves would be stunned, wouldn't we? It is a fact that we in the Western world are not nearly as demonstrative with our affection in public as our friends in the East are. And we in the Presbyterian tradition are especially known for reserving our emotions in worship. We have even been given the unpleasant title of "the Frozen Chosen" by some.

But Mary's act was shocking, even for the people in her day ... even though it was in her own house. Only Jesus really understands it. Mary herself probably doesn't completely understand it. She only knows that she is full of love and devotion for her Lord and she must show him how she feels, at all costs ... the cost of the expensive perfume, the cost of what those in the house might think of her ... none of it mattered to Mary at that moment.

How ironic that Judas is the one, in John's text, who speaks up out of criticism for Mary's act of love. He wants to know why this perfume wasn't sold for the amount it was worth and the money given to help the poor.

John wants us to know that Judas didn't really care about the poor. He was greedy and had been known for stealing money from the disciples' treasury. Perhaps he was thinking of how much money he could have swiped with the selling of that perfume.

Now, we know Jesus had a heart for the poor. Most of his compassion and care went to those who were poor and living in the margins in society. And it is true that it was a custom to give alms to the poor just before the Passover.

But Jesus defends Mary saying, "Leave her alone. 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."

Here Jesus again, gives the warning that he is going to die. Oil was used to prepare the dead for burial. It's interesting that even though John's gospel has Jesus' body prepared with oils and spices before his burial ... all three of the other gospels say he was not anointed. That is why the women went to the tomb that Sunday morning ... so they could anoint with oils and spices and give Jesus a proper burial.

It's also interesting that the only people who were not anointed after their death, were criminals who were crucified. It was believed that they did not deserve such care.

It sounds as if Jesus were possibly saying that Mary, unknowingly, was preparing Jesus, in a sense, for his burial that was coming very soon.

Jesus accepted this costly sign of devotion as a precious, valued thing. In a time when his heart must have been breaking, when he was dreading the coming days, how he must have appreciated the extravagant love that was poured out for him from this gentle woman.

Jesus himself, was about to pour out his own extravagant love for the world ... his love, his blood, his life!

Where would we be without him? What could be more important in our lives than to be devoted to him? Paul says in his letter to the Philippians that he is one of those who has lots of reason to brag. He comes from a long line of righteous, law obeying Jews. He himself was a Pharisee, a leader in the temple.

But Paul realized that all those things are nothing, they are worthless compared to what Jesus has done. The most valuable thing we can possibly have is knowing Jesus our Lord.

What is it that is costly for you? What would you consider a costly devotion for the Lord? Albert Schweitzer said, "If there is something you own, that you can't give away, then **you** don't own **it**. It owns **you**."

As we approach Holy Week and we think about the sacrifice that Jesus gave for us, perhaps we should look again at our lives, at our hearts, at how we give ourselves in worship ... and see if there is anything that owns us besides God ... anything that seems too costly to give.

Our hymn says "Lord, I give you my heart, I give you my soul ..."

Christ deserves our pure, costly devotion in return for his extravagant love that was poured out for us."

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