

A Demonstration of Love©**John 12:1-8****March 17, 2013****Dr. Sharlyn Gates**

All four of the gospel writers tell of a similar story of Jesus being anointed with oil. Each one has a slightly different focus and reason. Two of them have the oil being poured on his head. And in Luke and here in John, it is over his feet.

Each gospel writer we know has a special message for the audience they are writing to. And of course, we are fortunate enough to be the audience for all of them.

So, in John, we have Jesus in the home of his close, dear friends – Mary, Martha and Lazarus. They are in Bethany, which is just a couple of miles outside of the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. Jesus had been keeping a very low profile out in the country after the miracle of raising Lazarus from death to life.

The raising of his friend Lazarus caused much excitement, of course. Many of the Jews who were there that day to comfort and console his sisters, Martha and Mary, witnessed this amazing thing and became believers in Jesus as the Messiah.

And who wouldn't go shout that story to every place you went afterward? It would be an incredible story that would not be forgotten. They were overjoyed and elated.

Well, some of them were. And, of course, some were not. The word spread to the Chief Priest and other Temple Leaders and that was, for them, the last straw. They were losing ground, losing power over the people. And now they vowed they would have Jesus killed.

So for Jesus and his 12 disciples to go back to Bethany, the place where that miracle happened, knowing Jesus' life was on the line, took much courage. And even more so, was the decision to go from there to Jerusalem for the Passover.

We've heard about the sisters, Martha and Mary before. We know the story of how Martha was the busy one – serving, making sure her guests were taken care of and had all they needed to fill their stomachs and to be comfortable.

Mary, on the other hand, was the sister who chose to sit at Jesus' feet, talking to him, not wanting to spare one moment away from him. She was reprimanded by her sister, but Jesus defended her devotion then and he certainly does now, in this story, as well.

But Mary's demonstration of love for Jesus is one that I think might make all of us a little uncomfortable. Here they are in the dining room, at the table, reclining on the pillows and eating, as was the custom in those days. Martha was serving, of course.

And Mary comes into the room carrying a jar of expensive ... VERY expensive perfumed oil. So expensive, in fact, that it is figured to be the cost of a year's wage for a laborer back then. A whole years wage!

Mary's heart is full of gratitude and love for her friend, Jesus. He has given new life to her beloved brother. She knows his life is in danger. She is overcome with feeling and a desire to show him her love. She casts all reason and all restraint aside as she bows down on her knees and pours the entire jar of oil over Jesus' feet. Every drop is used to anoint his feet.

She massages the oil into his tired, weary feet. And she does something else that is shocking. Like a woman who has no good reputation, she reaches up and loosens her long hair, lets it fall for all in the room to see and she begins wiping the feet of Jesus, drying the oil with her hair.

This act of pure passionate love must have caused a loud, uncomfortable silence to permeate the room, mixing in with the fragrance of the expensive perfume. Mouths dropped open, eyes staring, heads shaking in disbelief. What was she doing?!!

It was as if the fragrant oil came pouring right out of her heart. She was so consumed with love and gratitude.

Finally, Judas speaks out. Judas, the betrayer of Jesus. We already know what he is going to do next. We, who are on this side of the cross and resurrection know that he will be the one who brings the accusers of Jesus straight to where he is so he can be arrested.

And we know, because John gives us this side note, that he was the Treasurer for the disciples. He handled the money given for their ministry, but John tells us he liked to secretly skim some off for himself.

But, if we didn't know all that, I think most of us would nod in agreement with Judas on this point. There is something reckless ... something very careless ... about Mary's wasteful action, not to mention how uncomfortable we might feel in witnessing this sensual act of PDA – a public display of affection.

And that might be especially true for us who have a reputation for being the “Frozen Chosen.” We are uncomfortable when someone gets a little too demonstrative in worship – like raising our hands a little too high or shedding tears of joy or passion or sorrow. I have people tell me they have stayed home instead of coming to worship out of fear that they will be seen crying. We don't want to show too much emotion. Emotional demonstrations of love and passion might fit with the Pentecostals but – Presbyterians???

Judas's comment about saving the money to help the poor seems like a good thing – until we read more about his ulterior motives. He wasn't really as concerned for the poor as he was for himself. His righteousness was – to keep in line with St. Paddy's Day – “a bunch of malarkey.”

It was more a façade than it was real concern for others. It was a self-righteousness – an indignant protest that covered up his own self-serving.

And Jesus again stood up for his friend, Mary. He told Judas, (and he tells us too) that we will always have the poor to take care of. But that is not the issue here. We know Jesus cares deeply for the poor. But Jesus was about to give his life out of his own passionate love for us. Yes, even for those of us who are more like Judas, or Martha, than Mary.

Mary's anointing of Jesus was, for her, a demonstration of thanks and love. And Jesus recognized it and appreciated it. But, for Jesus, it was even more. He interpreted it as an anointing for his death. When he died, they were so rushed to put him in the tomb because the Sabbath was upon them, that he was not even given the proper anointing of oil.

It was a pre-anointing for a body that would be broken for all.

But there was more! Because Jesus, like Lazarus, would rise from the grave! He would not only have new life but he would become the King of all who would trust him. A King who had conquered death. The fragrance of incense and anointing – the fragrance of new life mingled in the air with the fragrance of death – our death, but our resurrection as well.

If that isn't enough for us to have melted hearts, to cast aside our inhibitions and to truly worship Him with grateful hearts full of love and passion – to demonstrate our love with extravagance then perhaps nothing is enough.

And so, I ask you - and me – how do we demonstrate the love we have, the undying gratitude we have for him? How do we break the alabaster jar of extravagant love that we carry in our hearts? How do we pour out passionate love for one who did the same for us?

On this last Sunday of Lent, we look back at the beginning of the journey with Jesus in the wilderness, tempted by the power that would try to pull him away from his destination and purpose. We remember how, in his weakness, he portrayed power. He resisted the temptation and persevered on in his mission.

And as we come to the end of this Lenten Season, we know that we are entering into the days when darkness covered the world, when the Son of God lamented and cried great tears. When he felt God had turned from him. When he, full of determination and love for a world lost in sin, was nailed to the cross and bled and died because of that extravagant love for us.

May we abandon our self-restraints and pour out our authentic, genuine love for the One who did the same and more for us.