

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 5th Sunday of Lent, March 13, 2016

Forward Momentum: The Anointing of Jesus

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March 13, 2016

John 12:1-8

Today is the fifth Sunday of Lent and my message today is the last in my series of Forward Momentum toward the crucifixion and resurrection.

Jesus is in Bethany visiting the home of his good friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus, who Jesus raised from the dead not long before. Jesus knows that in less than a week he will be crucified and will be resurrected as Lazarus was. He has told his disciples this several times but they still don't believe him.

Remember that the raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-44) was the event that precipitated the Pharisees and chief priests efforts to kill Jesus (John 11:45-57). Caiaphas the high priest said, *“You do not realize that it is better for you for that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish’ ... So from that day on they plotted to take his life ... 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?’ 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.”*

In today's police vernacular, they issued a BOLO, a “Be on the lookout” notice for Jesus.

Jesus was not yet in Jerusalem but he was headed there. First however he stopped to visit his friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus in Bethany. He had the forward momentum to his passion but stopped enroute. The story as I read it this morning differs from that in the other gospels. In my mind John's telling says far more, not the least of which is that Mary is not identified in the other stories and the location is different. The details are not important but the message is.

Jesus is a banquet table reclining with his disciples, including Judas, when Mary brings out a flask of extremely costly perfume called nard. Depending on which Bible

translation we read, the flask contained was either a pound or a pint. In Roman measure that translates to 11 to 12 ounces. That is a lot of expensive perfume.

Nard comes from the Himalayas in India. It is oil extracted from the spikenard plant which is native to India, not the plant of the same name which can be found in our forests and hills.

Nard was used by the Romans to perfume the head and hair but most importantly it was used to anoint the dead. This flask of nard was incredibly expensive. Judas said that it was worth a year's wages or about 300 denarii. One denarius was the daily wage of a common laborer and thus 300 is roughly a year's wages since nothing could be earned on the Sabbath or other holy days.

This may indicate that Lazarus's family was very wealthy but we really don't know. It could have been a family heirloom or perhaps it was left over from when Lazarus died and was buried. It may have represented Mary's life savings. We can only speculate about it.

It is Saturday night when the dinner is served. The next day Jesus will make his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Judas will betray him for 30 pieces of silver, 30 denarii, and Jesus will be arrested on Thursday and crucified on Friday. The forward momentum is accelerating. In less than a week Jesus will die.

Mary opened the flask of nard, pours it on Jesus' feet according to John, and dries his feet with her long hair instead of using a towel. It was a sign of love and deep devotion but it probably shocked those who were present. It certainly shocked Judas who said that it should instead have been sold and the money given to the poor. That sounds magnanimous but he more probably thought that if it were sold he could steal much of it. He kept the funds for the apostles and scripture tells us that he tended to help himself to the funds. He was a thief, which Jesus undoubtedly realized. Think about it. In a few days Judas would betray Jesus for 30 denarii. What might Judas have done for something worth ten times as much?

The other disciples were probably also shocked, not because of the anointing, but because of the manner in which it was done. A Jewish woman would never unbind her hair in public. That would be considered to be a sign of loose morals. Mary was not

married and acting this way toward a famous, single rabbi, would certainly raise eyebrows as would wiping off the oil with her hair.

Jesus responded to Judas in an uncharacteristic way saying, *“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.”* Mary’s action was a true act of love and quite likely the remainder of the nard was intended to anoint Jesus’ body later. Jesus might ordinarily have agreed that the nard should be sold to aid the poor, but he couldn’t reject this incredible act of love and he undoubtedly knew that if he did, Judas would embezzle much of the money.

William Barclay¹ calls Mary’s action as “love’s extravagance” and quotes O. Henry’s short story, *The Gift of the Magi*, wherein a poor couple very much in love wanted to buy each other a special Christmas present. Each of them had only one prized possession. The woman’s was her beautiful long hair and his was a gold watch which his father had given him.

He sold his watch to buy to buy a set of expensive tortoise shell jeweled combs for her lovely hair --- and she sold her hair to buy him a platinum fob for his watch.

Barclay said, *“Each had given the other all there was to give. Real love cannot think of any other way to give ...*

“Mary wiped Jesus’s feet with the hair of her head ... That was the sign of an immoral woman. But Mary never even thought of that ... Mary loved Jesus so much that it was nothing to her to hear what others thought.”

Our Daily Bread (February 25, 2012) said, “Mary poured a bottle of expensive perfume on His feet. Then, in what may have been an even more daring act, she wiped His feet with her hair. Not only did Mary sacrifice what may have been her life’s savings, she also sacrificed her reputation. In first-century Middle Eastern culture, respectable women never let down their hair in public. But true worship is not concerned about what others think of us. To worship Jesus, Mary was willing to be thought of as immodest, perhaps even immoral.

“Some of us may feel pressured to be perfect when we go to church so that people will think well of us. Metaphorically speaking, we work hard to make sure we have every hair in place. But a healthy church is a place where we can let down our hair

and not hide our flaws behind a façade of perfection. In church, we should be able to reveal our weaknesses to find strength rather than conceal our faults to appear strong.

“Worship doesn’t involve behaving as if nothing is wrong; it’s making sure everything is right --- right with God and with one another. When our greatest fear is letting down our hair, perhaps our greatest sin is keeping it up.

“Whenever we gather to worship let’s not hide behind a façade; Instead, let’s be open and honest with others and also with God.”

That is forward momentum!

Amen.

1. William Barclay, The Gospel of John, rev. ed., Vol. 2, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1975

Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011