

Sunday, April 7, 2019
 Rev. Jessica Paulsen
 FPC, Corning
 Isaiah 43:16-21
 John 12:1-8

God Moves Us...to Empty Ourselves

It was on the Wednesday that they called him a waster. The place smelled like the perfume department of a mall. It was as if somebody had bumped their elbow against a bottle and sent it crashing to the floor, setting off the most expensive stink bomb on earth. But it happened in a house, not a shop.

And the woman who broke the bottle was no casual afternoon shopper. She was the penniless poorest of the poor, giving away the only precious thing she had. And he sat still while she poured the liquid all over his head... as unnecessary as aftershave on a full crop of hair and a bearded chin. And those who smelled it, and those who saw it, and those who remembered that he was against extravagance, called him a waster.

They forgot that he was also the poorest of the poor. And they who had much and who had given him nothing, objected to a pauper giving him everything. Jealousy was in the air when a poor woman's generosity became an embarrassment to their tight-fistedness... That was on the Wednesday, when they called him a waster.

(https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1035578303123778&id=1279082272241)

28) -Iona Community, Scotland

This is a reflection on this passage, and the other anointing stories in the other gospels, from the Iona Community in Scotland. The Iona Community is a dispersed Christian ecumenical community working for peace and social justice, rebuilding of community and the renewal of worship (<https://iona.org.uk/#>) and offers many different resources for worship and The sermon preached in worship may vary from this manuscript in scope, formulations, and content. This manuscript is intended for personal use only. Per my agreement with the Session, I retain all ownership and copyright of these works and ask that you not make copies or distribute them without my consent.

preaching. I share their reflection this morning because it brings a couple things about this passage to the front of our thinking.

First, the smell. We've probably all been around someone who's been maybe just a little too generous with the perfume or cologne. Or you've been nearby when a small bottle of perfume has slipped to the floor and broken—sending the scent all over the room and anyone who happens to be in it.

Now, we have this story—Mary intentionally pouring a pound (16 oz.) of pure nard onto the feet of Jesus. A few things to know about nard at the time of Jesus. It was extremely expensive—most likely imported from India and the amount Mary had would have been worth many years of wages. For a visual—here's my small bottle of perfume. It's 0.5 oz, not even a full ounce. This bottle of natural air spray is 4 oz. Now here's a jar filled with 16 oz. water. This is how much perfume Mary poured over the feet of Jesus. And she didn't water it down either—we're told it was pure nard.

So, imagine the smell. It had the potential to be overpowering and long-lasting. It's even possible that the smell would have still been clinging to Jesus when he was dying on the cross. As he was being crucified, he may have still been able to smell Mary's anointing.

For that's what it is—Mary is anointing Jesus in this moment. Anointings at this time happened only for specific living people, kings and prophets, or happened once you died as bodies were anointed for burial. Jesus is never anointed as a king or prophet—nor is anointed in death. What Mary does in this moment, is show her understanding of who Jesus is and her knowledge that Jesus will die. Mary is doing in this moment what Jesus will do later on Maundy Thursday—she is demonstrating great servitude and love—with a pound of costly pure nard.

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And it's scandalous! Scandalous, I tell you! We might read this story now and look at it and think how nice it is that Mary is anointing Jesus but, in that moment, in that time, this action had the potential to scandalize everyone present and be forever tied to Mary's name the rest of her life. First, she touches Jesus. Not only does she touch him, but she touches and washes his feet. He is not her husband. As a good Jewish woman, you did not go around washing other men's feet. It just wasn't done. Second, in order to wipe his feet, she lets her hair down. This was a big no-no. Again, good Jewish women did not let their hair down in public—that was done in the privacy of their own home and only for their husbands. This would have been seen as completely inappropriate and outside the bounds of what was allowed.

Yet, Mary does it anyway. She had to have known all of this. She knew the risk she was taking. She knew the cost (both personally and financially) of her actions. And she did it anyway.

I wonder how quickly all of this ran through her mind as she got the perfume, moved to the feet of Jesus, and anointed him. Did she rationalize everything that was happening and decide the reasons for doing it outweighed the reasons not to do it? Or was it more of something she felt compelled to do—to offer this extravagant gift and service to Jesus—and the consequences ran through her mind in a way that she was aware of them but knew they didn't matter?

I like to think it was the second one—that she knew what she needed to do, was aware of the risks, but committed to her action. Rather like the great quote from naval history, “Damn the torpedoes—full speed ahead!” (<https://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2014/july/damn-torpedoes>). Mary completed her great act of her service, offering her extravagant gift.

Do we do the same?

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Do we offer extravagant gifts to God? Or to others?

Do we offer great acts of service to God? Or to others?

Do we follow Mary's example, knowing what we're called to do, and complete our offerings of service and gifts?

Or do we hold back? Do we question what might happen next? Do we wonder about the consequences? Or if the risks are worth completing such service?

Friends, we come and gather around this table, this sacrament of holy communion, asking God to unite us and send us out into the world to embody Christ's love and grace. God offers us nourishment here so that we might do what God has called us to do.

The question then is—are we actually going to do it? Do we offer all that we are to God, emptying ourselves, so that God's love and nourishment might find space in our lives?

Mary did. She offered all that she was to Jesus, acknowledging what was to come, and preparing him for death. She did all of this without concern for what it cost.

Friends, sometimes our faith calls us to say, as Rear Admiral David Farragut probably said, "Damn the torpedoes—full speed ahead!" Will we answer that call? Will we tell the world—Damn the consequences—this is what God has called us to do? Those are the questions. What will be our answer?

Note: I'm indebted to the gentlemen of the *Pulpit Fiction* podcast, Rev. Eric Fistler and Rev.

Robb McCoy, for some of the summary information about this passage. You can find them at:

www.pulpitfiction.com

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