

**Misplaced Priorities**  
**John 12:1-8**  
**April 7, 2019 – Fifth Sunday in Lent**

Our Gospel Lesson for today is packed with wonderfully important information. Here we have Mary anointing Jesus feet with some very precious perfume and drying them with her hair. The scene alone must have been a real sight to behold. Remember, in the middle-eastern culture of Jesus' time, a proper woman kept her hair covered, much as an observant Muslim woman might keep her hair covered today. So imagine, among this group of people, Mary kneeling at Jesus feet, pouring a good size bottle of perfume on them, then letting down her hair and tenderly beginning to dry his feet with her hair.

Friends, in the culture of the day, this would have truly been seen as a supreme act of intimacy. But our Gospel writer doesn't seem to emphasize the intimate nature of the act. It's not in John, but other Gospels reporting on this same scene quote Jesus as saying "She has done a beautiful thing for me." John, on the other hand, has Jesus once again predict his death. He says, "This perfume was to be used in preparation for my burial, and this is how she has used it."

So let's back up to Judas. "Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), complained, 'This perfume was worth a year's wages! Why wasn't it sold and the money given to the poor?'" Now, you and I both know that there is nothing wrong with giving money to the poor. Indeed, it's a good thing to support those institutions that help the poor. But, once again, it's all about priorities. It's all about balance. It's a very common argument within churches. Should we spend the money on ourselves? Should we make our sanctuary or our fellowship hall or our sign look nicer, or should we give the money to missions? And the answer is "Yes." It's all about balance. Balancing these issues can be very delicate, and generally, it's not something that everyone agrees on. Judas did not agree.

It might surprise you when I tell you that I don't think Judas motivation in betraying Jesus was money. Oh Matthew says he was paid 30 shekels of silver, a significant but not a huge sum of money. Mark and Luke simply say the authorities paid Judas to betray Jesus; and John never mentions an exchange of money. But I don't think Judas betrayed Jesus simply for the money. I believe Judas betrayed Jesus because Jesus was not living up to Judas' hopes for the Messiah. In Judas' mind, Jesus "talked a good game" but nothing changed. The Roman suppression did not change. The burdensome taxation did not change. The over burdensome Jewish law did not change. Jesus preached about all this wonderful love, but nothing changed. So Judas was frustrated. We might even say that Judas was fed up. He might say, "We've been following this guy around.

He's healed some people. He's done some wonderful teaching, but nothing changed. And now. . . now he even condones the wasting of perfume worth a year's wages." Friends, I need to say that, as some point in time, we have probably all been where Judas was.

Now, before I go any further and before you accuse me of sacrilegious heresy, I need to quickly tell you that something did change! But, unless you were one of the few people who were healed, either physically or spiritually, it did not change in Jesus' earthly lifetime. It changed at Pentecost. How often have I stated that the greatest miracle of Christianity is that fact that the Christian Church not only survived the first century but actually thrived despite severe Roman oppression; and Pentecost was the beginning of the growth of the Christian Church. Pentecost was the beginning of Jesus' love truly coming to fruition in his followers. Pentecost was the beginning of Christianity actually changing the world. But we don't celebrate Pentecost for nine weeks yet, so let's get back to the home of Lazarus.

Luke tells a very similar story to John, and I confess that I like Luke's story better. In Luke, it's not Mary that anoints Jesus but an unnamed prostitute. The story begins with the woman standing behind Jesus weeping; and as she weeps her tears fall on Jesus feet. She proceeds to dry his feet with her hair and anoint them this perfume. Do you see the richness, the richness in the weeping woman. Luke doesn't tell us why she's weeping. Maybe she's weeping out of awareness for her past sins. Maybe she's weeping because she has at least a sense of Jesus fate. Or maybe she's weeping because Jesus has shown her agape love and kindness that few other men ever show her. Or maybe it's all of that.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus turns to Peter and states: "Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little loves little." Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you; go in peace." So how do we set our priorities? In one word – "Love."

I am sometimes asked to fill in at Sunday Afternoon Chapel Services at the Wesleyan Village in Elyria. After one such service, a retired United Methodist Minister came up to me and said, "I like you. You preach love. I used to preach love. I like that." I took that as a compliment. Sometimes I think that I beat "the love theme" too much. Sometimes, as I am preparing a sermon, I think, "Mark, they probably want to hear something other than they should love God, love their neighbors, and love themselves." (I'm not going to take a poll on that today.)

In a little under three months I will be leaving this congregation; and so, I ask myself, "What is it that I want to leave with this congregation? What is it that I want this congregation to remember me for?" And my greatest wish is that people will say, "He loved us; and he helped us love others, all others."

Over the past few weeks I have repeatedly mentioned Marianne Williamson's book *A Return to Love*. Here Williamson essentially states that there is nothing but love, because "God is love." Love is the energy of the world. Williamson essentially follows the philosophy that hatred and evil are simply the absence of Love; and we cure the hatred by returning to love. Now, while I really like that, I just made the whole process sound a whole lot simpler than it obviously is. And still, I think that each of us individually and corporately can solve a whole lot of problems by simply asking "Where's the love?"

You've heard it all before, we are called, called by our Christian baptism, called to experience love, and called to share love; and anything to the contrary, simply is not Christian. And that's what today's lesson is all about – a woman sharing her deepest love with her Lord and Savior, a love more powerful than even three quarters of a pound of expensive perfume.

May each of us experience and share that same love every day of our lives.  
Amen.

Rev. Mark L. Steiger, Pastor  
North Olmsted United Methodist Church