

# **First Presbyterian Church**

**Marianna, Florida**

**Lenten Luncheon March 23, 2010**

**Reflections led by Huw Christopher, Pastor**

**Question for Reflection:** ‘What Is Precious in God’s Sight and in Our Sight?’

**Welcome and Prayer:**

Gracious God, we thank you for this opportunity during Lent to pause again in the middle of this day to share this food and fellowship together, and most of all to reflect on all that makes us precious as your beloved children, and as the followers of Jesus Christ. Guide us in our reflections together that through them we may come to appreciate more what you see to be precious, and therefore, what we as your children should see as precious, for we ask these things in the name of Jesus, your Son and our Lord, through whom we are assured most fully of your love and your grace towards us. Amen.

**Opening Hymn Page 18 “I Love to Tell the Story” stanzas 1 and 3**

**Unison Prayer:**

**Gracious God, we gather here today in gratitude for all the good gifts of creation that declare your praise. As we move deeper in this season of Lent, show us how to recognize your beauty, and to offer our praise and thanksgiving. Give us ears to hear your word, eyes to**

**see your face, and courage to follow the path you set before us.  
Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.**

As we have sung of the story of Jesus of which we love to sing I would like to invite you today to read with me one of those stories of Jesus that many of us heard last Sunday from John 12. As we read these words found on the sheet I would like to invite you to try to picture yourself as part of this scene.

**John 12:1-8**

Leader: Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. [2] There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. [3] Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. [4] But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said,

Men: [5] "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"

Leader: [6] (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) [7] Jesus said,

Women: "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. [8] You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

As we try to picture this scene I was tempted to bring a strong perfume and to spray it around the room that we might capture something of the aroma that may have filled that house on that night. I don't know how many people there suffered from allergies and may have left that dinner meal sneezing and with stuffed up noses or tightening throats. I do know that many, including my wife, Rachel, have some problem in this respect so I decided against the perfume. It also has given me a good reason for not buying her a lot of expensive perfume as well!

Even if we cannot really enter into the smell of that dinner meal I would like to invite you to enter into it in your minds as I invite you to reflect with me on some questions that came to my mind as I read this story again this past summer in a workshop at San Francisco Theological Seminary.

These were some of the questions that came to my mind. Some of them are only questions for reflection because the narrative does not give us the answers. You may well think of others on which you want to reflect.

1. Who was at the dinner?

Was it just Jesus and Lazarus, Martha and Mary and Judas? These are the only people that were mentioned. Or were all of the disciples there? Were any of the people mentioned in chapter 11 who had come to comfort Martha and Mary in the death of Lazarus also present? What about some of the people who had believed in Jesus because he raised Lazarus from the dead? What about some who had gone to report the actions of Jesus in raising Lazarus from the dead to the authorities?

2. Who would have been the center of attention at the dinner? Would it have been Jesus or Lazarus?

3. What would it have been like to have the opportunity to talk with Lazarus?

How often would he have been asked to share his experiences of what it was like to be dead and then to be raised from the dead?

4. How many took the opportunity to pose questions to Jesus?

How did you do it? What do you really mean when you said, “I am the resurrection and the life?”

Whatever conversation may have been taking place around that dinner table Mary must have put a stop to it all as she took that pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, probably imported from India, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped them with her hair.

5. Where had Mary gotten this perfume – obviously it was expensive – Judas suggested it could have been sold for three hundred denarii, about the annual wage of a working person in those days.

6. Had she had this perfume for a long time as a family heirloom? If so, why, if such perfume was used for the anointing of the dead, had she not used it on her brother, Lazarus, when he had died?

7. If it was something new had she gone out and purchased this very expensive perfume as a way of expressing her gratitude to Jesus for bringing her brother back to life?

Her gracious, generous, overwhelming action is, of course, quickly overshadowed by the reaction of Judas as he asks, “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?”

How many can sympathize with Judas in this question? How often have we questioned someone’s generous action and have felt that the money could have been used in other, better ways?

On the other hand, how often has the reaction of people like Judas stopped us being generous ourselves because we fear that people will question our motives or our actions?

It is interesting to read the Gospel writer John’s aside in parenthesis in many Bibles: (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.)

Was this just John’s way of reacting to Judas for his betrayal of Jesus?

How much money and goods that are set aside to help other people are still being lost because people are thieves and use what has been given for the good of those in need for their own end?

We remember, of course, that this was not the first time that Mary’s actions had been criticized in front of Jesus. I would invite you to read with me the more familiar story as found in Luke, chapter 10 as printed on the sheet: (Luke 10:38-42)

Leader: Now as Jesus and his disciples went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and

listened to what he was saying. [40] But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked,

Men: "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

Leader: But the Lord answered her,

Women: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

In this story, of course, the criticism comes not from one of the disciples of Jesus but from her own sister.

In both cases we see that Jesus comes to the defense of Mary and what she has chosen to do. In the one place he commends her for her role as a disciple sitting at his feet listening to his teaching. This in and of itself was quite a radical thing for Mary to do. Women in those days were not considered worthy to be the disciples of learned teachers. In commending Mary Jesus is beginning to break down those cultural barriers between male and female. His action still has an influence upon the life of the church today. It is reflected in our Brief Statement of Faith in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) when it says that through the Holy Spirit God calls "women and men to all ministries of the church."

In the later passage, of course, Jesus commends Mary for her action in anointing his feet with the expensive perfume. In this later case we do not know whether his commendation of her was actually what she herself had anticipated as Jesus says, "'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.'"

Had Mary purchased this in anticipation of the burial of Jesus? Was she seeing more than other people the rising opposition towards Jesus so she decided that she had better take advantage of the opportunity that presented itself to her now? Is this a flashback to the Easter morning story when the women came with their perfumes to anoint the dead body of Jesus, and found, of course, that they could not do so because he had risen from the dead.

Did Mary really have anointing the dead body of Jesus in mind, or was this just a simple gesture of gratitude to Jesus for bringing her brother back to life again which Jesus himself interprets in relationship to his own death? Whatever may have been Mary's motive we can not avoid the commendation that she receives from Jesus. Her actions and the commendation that she receives prompt all of us to look at our own actions and to think would Jesus likewise commend us for what we do and how we use what we have to show our gratitude to him?

He concludes, of course, by saying, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." In these words he appears to be commending Mary for taking advantage of the opportunity that was given to her to show her love and her appreciation to Jesus before it is too late. Her action prompts us to think about how we take advantage of the opportunities that come to us to show kindness and gratitude to other people?

You may well have thought of other questions on which you have been reflecting, or on which you want to continue to reflect as you think about this story.

Let me conclude, though, by suggesting two inter-related things on which we might all want to continue to reflect as we think about this story and what it says about what is precious in the sight of God and, therefore, should be precious in our sight, as we seek to live out our true identity as the beloved children of God and the followers of Jesus Christ. The comment of John about Judas highlights how people can chose to use the good gifts God has given them. They can steal them, they can hoard them, they can use them for their own personal, self-centered ends. Judas may later have gone out and hung himself but how many people are still hurting other people by using for their own selfish ends what is intended by God and is often intended by other people for the good of others, especially the poor and needy? Corruption, the taking advantage of one's position of trust and of power, did not end with the death of Judas. Unfortunately we read about it or hear about it every day, and on times some of us may have been guilty of it ourselves.

The contrast to Judas is, of course, the action of Mary who takes that which is precious and valuable and instead of keeping it and using it for herself gives it back to God as a way of showing her love and her gratitude. Mary receives the commendation of Jesus for how she has chosen to use a material possession of great value. Her action reminds us that as we acknowledge God as the Creator of all good gifts then everything we have and everything we are has to be seen as precious in his sight. As we also come to see all of God's good gifts as precious, like Mary we too can come to see how they might be used to show our love and our gratitude to him if we chose to do so. As our Lenten sermons have reminded us God still

gives us that freedom to choose how we will react and how we will respond.

Our closing prayer will cause us to reflect on the way in which our expressions of love for God pale in insignificance to the way in which God has chosen to express God's love for us in Jesus Christ. Then our hymn will assure us of the good news that it is this love that will not let us go.

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### **Closing Prayer:**

**Good Lord, a pound of expensive perfume when poured out, would overwhelm any room! Such an extravagant gift would certainly seem too much. Yet Mary's gift pales beside the one that Jesus would give to Mary and to the whole world. The puddles of perfume around the soaking feet of Jesus were nothing when compared to the puddles of precious blood pouring from the wounds of Jesus. The extravagance of Jesus' gift overwhelms the world, and makes your love in him irresistible to us. We thank you, O God, for this love so amazing and so divine. Amen.**

**Closing Hymn Page 6 "O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go"**

**stanzas 1 and 4**