

ANNOINTED

A SERMON FOR LENT
SUNDAY, MARCH 17, 2013
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
TED W. LAND, INTERIM PASTOR

JOHN 12:1-8

John's gospel is different from all the rest, and each gospel differs from the other three. Sometimes, it is the order in which stories are told, other times, it is the place where events happened. Then again, different characters emerge in similar stories, and it is often hard to tell them apart.

Remember what I've told you, what I learned from my father, who spent a number of years in law enforcement: when three or four people all tell exactly the same story, they got together and made it up!

No one will ever accuse Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John of having done that!

For example, of the four, John is the only one who tells us the story of the raising of Lazarus. He refers to it here in our lesson for today. You would think that something as significant as raising someone from the dead would have made Matthew, Mark, and Luke, wouldn't you?

Maybe they didn't believe it. Maybe they weren't there. Maybe they kept the story secret to protect Lazarus, or Mary, or Martha, his sisters. John wrote so much later than the other gospel writers that it is indeed possible that he could tell the story because the principals were no longer alive to be at risk. I've got some stories, some good ones, that I can't tell until a few more folks die off, and some that I can only tell now because the one who swore me to secrecy is dead and gone.

Another aspect of John's gospel is that his dislike for Judas shines through. No where does the fact that John despises the one who betrayed Jesus shine through more clearly than when John reveals that Judas stole from the common purse which was the treasury of Jesus and His disciples.

There is an irony, an anomaly, in this story: Bethany, the village where Lazarus, Mary, and Martha lived, was literally, the place of the poor. That is how the name translates from the Hebrew. It was over the hill and out of sight of the Golden City, the Holy City, of Jerusalem. It was the place where beggars and day-workers, who were not allowed to stay inside the city walls after sunset, lived.

Yet here in a house in the place of the poor, a lavish gift is bestowed on Jesus. That pound of costly perfume was worth three hundred days pay! A denarius was the daily wage, and 300 denarii the equivalent of a year's wages. Where Mary got the money for this gift we shall never know, but she took the costly perfume, and anointed the feet of Jesus with it, and then wiped them with her long hair and John tells us that the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

It was an amazingly generous and amazingly sensual gift.

It was a gift of love. It was a gift of gratitude. Remember, Lazarus was dead. He'd been in the tomb for three days, and when Jesus came, and asked for the tomb to be opened, Martha

protested, and uttered those profound words rendered in the King James Version as, “Lord, he stinketh!”

The perfume may have been purchased for the anointing of the body of Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary. They may have intended to use it, as the women who would rush to the grave on the first Easter intended to use the perfumes and ointments they took with them.

But at the tomb of Lazarus on the third day, and at the tomb of Jesus on the third day, no perfume, no ointment, was necessary to obscure the odor of putrefying flesh. For Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, and Jesus Himself was raised from the dead, and the grave could not hold the power of God over death.

Washing the feet was sign and seal of hospitality in the Middle East at the time of Jesus. A bowl of water and a towel was provided for guests to wash the dust of the dirt roads from their feet, which were usually shod in sandals.

If a host was wealthy, or particularly gracious, a servant or slave might wash the feet of the guests, or of a particularly honored guest. For a host, or hostess, to wash the feet of a guest was unheard of! For a woman to touch a man not her husband was unheard of! And to anoint a man's feet with perfume, and then dry those feet with her hair, which was usually kept veiled, which was described as a woman's crowning glory, which no one but her husband saw let down in an Orthodox Jewish household, that was outrageous!

Will Willimon writes:

“Here is love enacted, extravagant, sensuous, physical love that this woman is outrageously showing towards Jesus. ...But don't you think it strange that Jesus takes Mary's actions and regards them as a message directly from God? Very few times has anyone dared to mention that Jesus is in a deadly situation. This is the Gospel of John. In this Gospel Jesus makes much mention of his 'hour', when he is 'lifted up,' a veiled comment about his crucifixion. But almost never does Jesus directly say, 'I am going to be tortured to death.'

“And now in anointing Jesus' feet the same way one would anoint Jesus for burial in a tomb, there, in front of a man named Lazarus who has just been in the tomb, Mary becomes the person who tells the truth. This...shall end in a way that is horrible and very deadly.”
Pulpit Resource, Vol. 41, No.1, p. 50.

If Mary is reminding us that Jesus is going to die, she is also reminding us that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. The word, *Christos*, from which we derive what some children think is Jesus' last name, Christ, means simply “anointed”. The Messiah is the anointed one of God. The prophet of old anointed Saul as the first king over Israel, and David to be the Great King and Solomon may have been the last king anointed, the last Messiah, the last Great King.

Is Mary a prophet of God, called by the Father to anoint the Son as He assumes not a throne but a cross?

Will Willimon would suggest it:

“You might recall that the prophets of Israel not only spoke stirring, prophetic words but sometimes they performed prophetic acts. Ezekiel eats the scroll. Hosea takes an unfaithful wife. Get it? In these careful, ritualized actions that Mary performs with Jesus at the table,

Mary is being cast in the role of a prophet, a truth teller, enacting the truth that none dare speak. Jeremiah smashed a clay jar as a sign of the coming destruction of Jerusalem; Mary breaks a jar of perfume as a sign of our destruction of the Son of God.

We sing the old hymn, Crown Him with many crowns, the Lamb upon His throne, but the crown Jesus would wear was a crown of thorns, and it was a cross, not a throne, that would lift Him up.

Mary's scandalous, extravagant act foretells an even more scandalous, extravagant act. A crucifixion is horrible, disgusting, so much so that even the Apostle Paul refers to the scandal of the cross. Yet the extravagance of a gift worth a year's wages pales beside the gift of a human life, and even that pales beside the gift of the life of the Only Begotten Son of the Father.

Mary anointed Jesus, and as such, she stands in the line of the prophets of Israel.

Jesus was the anointed one of God, and He was anointed to reign not from a throne, but a cross. All of the Lenten season is a journey to the cross, and with the anointing of Jesus as though for burial, we can see the shadow of the cross, and see the pieces of the puzzle falling into place.

The puzzling, extravagant gift of a woman named Mary of Bethany reminds us of all the puzzling extravagant gift that God bestows upon us, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

And to Him be the glory, the power, the dominion and the praise, in the church and in the world, now and forever more. Amen and amen.