

This story from our gospel today must have meant a great deal to the early church. We hear about it from each of the 4 gospel writers. The different communities of faith to which the gospels are written treasured it and passed it on. It is told in different places with different characters. Matthew and Mark tell us that Jesus even remarked that this woman – whoever she was --- would be remembered forever for her devotion, no matter how uncomfortable it made people.

In Matthew and Mark, the dinner takes place at the house of Simon the Leper. A woman, who is unnamed in each gospel anoints Jesus' head, and those in attendance, (Matthew says they were the disciples) scold her for her extravagance.

In Luke the dinner takes place at the home of a Pharisee and a woman who was a notorious sinner wept over Jesus feet and then anointed him. This woman wasn't scolded for what she did but for *who she was*. She was a sinner, who offended their sensibilities, and not welcome in their company.

But in John, the dinner takes place in the only home the adult Jesus knew --- that of his friend Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary. Lazarus was probably relaxing with Jesus, resting up from his 4 days in the grave.....while Martha was doing what she did best ---- making a good meal. Mary offered her best perfume to her friend Jesus. It was an outrageous gift of reckless love. Luke tells us that Judas is the one who jumped all over Mary, basically for robbing the poor who *should* have been the recipient of her extravagance.

In serving Jesus that day, Mary made a lot of people uncomfortable, and did a lot of outrageous things. She loosened her hair in the company of men. The intimate act of massaging Jesus feet. In filling the room with the fragrance which no one could escape: she really made sure everyone witnessed her act. And it was outrageous to those witnesses that Jesus received her gift without hesitation. In fact, he tells them to back off when they are upset with her. This woman does not speak in any of these scenarios – but she steals the scene each time with symbolism of her act.

In the earlier gospel versions this woman anointed Jesus' head. That's how kings were anointed. Jesus was anointed at his baptism as Messiah. Anointing his feet in that context spoke volumes because *that's what happens to dead men*. Mary knew in her heart that day that Jesus was walking the dangerous road to Jerusalem, the road from which there would be no return. She anticipated what Jesus was anticipating --- the end of his earthly life among them. She did what she could to be with him in his pain.

Things were going to change, and those around Jesus didn't like it one bit. No longer would they have Jesus among them as friend, walking with them to Jerusalem. Each time Jesus told the disciples that he was going to die, they protested and tried to talk him into another way of doing things, but Mary, Mary understood. She may have been the only one of Jesus' acquaintance who understood.

The gospel of John tells us that when Lazarus was raised from the dead, many believed but others were fearful and chose to silence Jesus, to put an end to this new thing God was doing. Things had just gotten too uncomfortable for them. Mary knew Jesus time on earth was short. Mary knew that Jesus had been giving up his life all along. He had traded in his life for that of his friend Lazarus because now, the scriptures tells us, they were really gunning for both Lazarus and Jesus.

Mary's act of devotion was not just a personal gesture, but a prophetic demonstration. Prophets call people's attention in strange ways sometimes. (Did you know the prophet Ezekiel once ate a scroll to show people that he carried the Word of God inside him?)¹

What she did was pretty strange. You don't pre-anoint people for their burial before they die! You don't have to use the most expensive oil for that anyway. What Mary did was over-the-top extravagant. The price she paid for this prophetic act made no sense.

Her act brings to mind the price Jesus paid throughout his life and in his death. That doesn't make sense either but it demonstrates great love, selfless, reckless love. We are the recipients of extravagant love.

Mary's extravagance mirrors God's extravagant reckless love for us. God is doing a new thing. That's what Isaiah had been saying all along. And that extravagance makes people uncomfortable.

God's grace is abundant and over the top throughout John's gospel. At Cana, Jesus doesn't just give them wine enough for the partygoers, he produces the very best wine and way more than they can drink. In feeding the multitude, he offers them more food than any of the 5000 could eat. The disciples probably grumbled because they had to gather up the basketsful of leftovers.

While we are wandering in the wilderness wondering where we are going to get our next sip of water, God is making rivers in the desert!

Jesus takes this craziness one step further. As Judas pounces on her extravagance as misusing what could have been given to the poor, Jesus says, "I won't be here, but you will always have poor people." Jesus invites them to look forward, beyond his death, and suggests that if they're **really** interested in serving the poor, not to worry, there will be plenty of opportunity to do that.

The very next story in the Gospel of John is the story of Jesus' triumphant parade into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. At the end of that week he gathers his disciples together for supper, their Last Supper, THE last supper. The Jewish New Testament Scholar Amy-Jill Levine suggests that the story of Mary anointing Jesus feet should be considered the First Supper.²

She suggests that the anointing of Jesus' feet parallels Jesus' washing of his disciples feet. That Jesus took Mary's foot perfuming and made it a new thing --- foot washing. Thus tying together *devotion with servanthood*. In God's kingdom they always belong together. We love God first, and we serve our neighbors because of that love.

¹ Ezekiel 3:3

² Levine, Amy-Jill, "Entering the Passion of Jesus," Abingdon Press, 2018.

Back to the scene at Lazarus house; although there is disagreement in the house , Jesus reminds us that discipleship is not an either/or proposition. We don't have to decide between spending our time with Jesus and serving those God calls us to serve. We are called to do both. In fact we are commanded to do both. Serving the least among us begins with devotion to God.

That's what we do in the church – we gather here each Sunday to both hear again of God's reckless love for us, and give thanks for the abundance of it. And then, as Jesus suggests, we go in to the world, or invite the world into this place, to serve God by serving the least among us: those who are wanting, and hurting, those who desperately need a demonstration of reckless love.

Freely giving in response to freely receiving: a demonstration of good stewardship: loving as one has been loved. Stewardship of the love we have been given by God compels us to serve. Devotion begins at the feet of Jesus, but that is never where our devotion ends.