

An Extravagant Waste

I get Judas in this story. I really do. What Mary did was entirely inappropriate. Do you have any idea how much a pound of pure nard cost back then? Let me explain that nard was a highly aromatic oil extracted from the *Nardostachys jatamansi* plant found in the Himalayas of India. By the time it made its way to Palestine, a pound of the perfume would have cost—well, Judas tells us—over three hundred denarii. That’s equivalent to a full year’s wages for an average laborer. And Mary breaks open the jar and pours the entire contents onto Jesus’ feet.

I grew up in a home where frugality was a highly valued trait. Let me give you an example. On Saturday mornings when I was growing up, my dad always made pancakes. He used Bisquick and pure buttermilk. And my mom, to accompany those extravagant pancakes, would prepare those “smoky link” sausages that you can buy in the meat department of most grocery stores. Yumm! But since the pancakes were already extravagant, she would prepare exactly one and a half sausages per person. No more. Unless someone felt like giving you their half. Fat chance. And so I learned growing up that in a world where resources are limited, you just don’t splurge. And, you don’t waste. You don’t leave food uneaten on your plate. Why? You know the answer. Because of the “starving children in India.” Or Africa. Or wherever there are starving children. [As if that food could get to them.] [I get a heavy feeling in the pit of my stomach every time someone in my family wants to go out to eat. Let alone order something more expensive on the menu.

A whole pound of nard?

You may have noticed in this morning’s bulletin that today is listed as “Palm/Passion Sunday.” Well, which is it? It’s like there is an inherent conflict on this day. A conflict that should give each of us a heavy feeling in the pit of our stomach. On one hand, Jesus comes into Jerusalem, riding like a king on the back of a donkey. And the crowds welcome him as they would a king, by waving palm branches and shouting “Hosanna!”, which is Hebrew for “Save us; we beseech you!” (The words we all cried out when we read this morning’s psalm.) And on the other hand . . . well, we all know what’s going to happen to Jesus this week. Those same crowds are going to turn on him. And he’ll end up hanging on a cross. Jesus, the Messiah King, hanging on a cross. Such an extravagant waste. You just don’t do that. [You don’t die on a cross.] You don’t eat more than one and a half sausages with your buttermilk pancakes on Saturday morning. And you don’t spend the equivalent of a year’s salary on a whole pound of perfume made from nard, and then pour it all on someone’s feet. What was Mary thinking? Obviously, she wasn’t.

We’ve met her before, you know. In the previous chapter. She is the sister of Martha and Lazarus. We find out that Jesus has a special place in his heart for all three of them. And when Lazarus dies, he is heartbroken for all of them. For Martha, the practical, assertive one, who does what needs to be done. For Mary, who wears her emotions on her sleeve, and feels so deeply. And of course, for Lazarus, his dear friend, who was too young to die. Jesus decides it is time he reveals himself more completely. He uses his prodigious, heavenly powers to raise

Lazarus from the dead. And in the process, he threatens and angers the religious leaders, so much so that they decide to kill him. What an extravagant waste!

So here we are, in Bethany, at Lazarus', and Martha's, and Mary's house. We are specifically told that all three are present. Can you feel that ominous pit in your stomach? Can't you just go away for a while, Jesus? At least until things settle down a bit? Why push your luck? Why tempt fate?

On this day, six days before Passover, Mary is the only one to understand Jesus' fate. No one else gets it—especially Judas. An entire pound of Nard. On Jesus' feet. Almost as if she was anointing him for burial. She is so typically caught up in her feelings that she wipes his feet with her hair. It's so inappropriate. Disgusting, even. Wasn't there a spare towel in the house? Did Mary know somehow that in just a few days Jesus would gather them all together again, in nearby Jerusalem, and tell them that they must wash one another's feet, as if they were mere servants, and he would show them how? As if this were the true meaning of faithful discipleship, of living the way God wants us to live.

But today, days earlier, Mary is the only one who seems to get it. A woman. While the men just sit there. And Judas complains about the extravagant waste. That money could have been used to help the poor, for God's sake! But then Jesus puts everything into its proper perspective. "You always have the poor with you," he says, "but you do not always have me."

May we all live wastefully and extravagantly [and I might add, generously, passionately, preciously] for the sake of Jesus.

Who wants some sausages?

Amen.