

Yesterday, we experienced the extravagant love of Christians. We gathered amidst the dirt, grub, and mulch. I saw all of you spend a Saturday when you could have easily been preparing for the NAACP championship, sleeping in, or taking a trip to the Galleria. We even could have been serving at the Hope Center or LOTS. Yet, we knew that making our campus shine was important. It seemed outrageous and against cultural norms.

Similar to our gospel text

Our gospel text today reminds us how to act as followers of Christ. Through this story, we can imagine ourselves as each of the characters and evaluate where we truly need to stand going into Holy Week.

To understand the scripture in John, look at where they are gathered and when. This intimate group, the disciples and close followers, are back at Mary and Martha's home. It is about ten days before the Passover, the most important Jewish festival of the year. The group has gathered in the town of Bethany. He will soon give a closing dialogue of instructions to his disciples. At the same time, Our Good Shepherd has led everyone to a place that means poor, seemingly lifting up their importance in our ministry. The word for Bethany means house of the poor.¹ This alone hints to the reader the importance Jesus places on the poor

We have a scene that continues the one from an earlier story: Martha making dinner and Mary making a scene. Well, not truly, Mary is demonstrating the Love that Jesus will ask his followers to show in Chapter 13. Mary is being, in all honesty, a trustworthy follower of Christ. Yet, to someone in the ancient near east, she is acting outrageously.

Hers is an act of abundance, costing almost a year's worth of wages. However, the action was not wasted according to Jesus. This oil perfume is derived from a plant from India. Imagine the distance between India and the middle east.

Travel was not as simple then as it is today. The oil was costly and had gone far. What Jesus was prepared to do was costly and involved a great deal of movement, movement of the hearts to a new, deeper, understanding of God. And so, as Mary is most intimately anointing Jesus' feet with her hair, she is doing what is right in Christ's eyes. Her character reflects an abundant love. Her actions say that there is some way that the love Jesus has for us can be a two directional love.

The love that was poured out in the prophets, To David, and Isaiah, that love is still there and also it is changing.² We can have a response and in turn begin to show our love to God in a new way. All of this is symbolized with these bold actions.

The importance of what Mary is doing here is emphasized by the simple fact that she is putting Christ at the center of her actions.³ She is solely focused on one thing: preparing Jesus for the road ahead. Mary is one role model for discipleship: willing to put everything aside for Christ. Her reputation as a woman. She let down her carefully put up hair in a society when that was unseemly. Her role helping. She put that aside to reside at Jesus' feet. She has given everything up to be a disciple. This is what Jesus is calling us to do. She is showing complete adoration and gratitude with a bold action.

We should not be surprised by this call, in fact, Jesus referred to who he was and how his true followers reacted to him, "When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and

¹ Wright, N.T. (2004). *John for Everyone: Part 2 Chapters 11-21*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

² Wright, N.T. (2004). *John for Everyone: Part 2 Chapters 11-21*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

³Stroup, G. W. and Shoemaker, S.H. (2009). "John 12:1-8" in *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word*. pp.140-144. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

the sheep follow him because they know his voice...I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.”⁴ Mary knows Jesus and her role is to prepare and love for Christ.

She is tying in the devotion described in The Good Shepherd and the directive to be servant Leaders found in John 13. The same word is used when Mary wipes Jesus’ feet with her hair as is used when Jesus wipes his disciples feet. The challenging part of this story is not truly that Mary’s actions are scandalous, it is who names the scandal.

Remember, Jesus knows of our hearts, when we are going through the motions and when we truly believe in his salvific power of grace.⁵ Judas is a thief not only because of his thriftiness, or even his light touch, he is a thief because he has stolen into the inner circle of the Lord and does not truly believe Christ is the savior. John’s gospel recalls the thief in the shepherd story who comes to steal away the savior.

In the end, Judas will only steal away Christ for a while. Judas is not able to see Mary’s action for the act of gratitude and love. Instead, Judas will walk away from a relationship - tie to the parable of the prodigal son the older son walks away from the relationship with Christ.

John’s Gospel tells us that Judas is a thief. In truth, he is a fraud. The challenging part of this gospel, of every gospel is not asking ourselves when we are Mary, rather, it is in recognizing sometimes we are Mary. Sometimes, we are Judas. We betray Christ when we pretend to put other things in front of God. When we pretend we care about good and care for our own egos, we are betraying Christ. When we focus too much on the comfortable, we are betraying christ.

We must stay true to our Christian identity. In order to be more like Mary, it is time for bold action and stepping outside of our comfort zone. It is a time to look at God in a moment and say, yes, I will be uncomfortable in my love for you. I will wear my Christian heart boldly.

We also find Christ in holy moments of worship, we remember that Christ is our Good Shepherd and we can respond to him with abundant love. We gather to remember what is important and how to behave in a Christian manner.

However, it is our Christian duty to take those lessons beyond the church walls and into the world. Sometimes, those Christian actions: prayer before a meal, time at church on a day when most are watching a sports tournament, talking about our devotion to Christ, will make others uncomfortable. I hope we lean into that discomfort and ask people to join us.

⁴ John 10:4, 14-15

⁵ Lewis, K.M. (2014). *John Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.