

Daily Discipleship

John 12:1-8

Prayers of Discipleship *To Lavish Our Devotion Toward Christ*

Focus Question: *How can we express our love of the One who gives us life?*

word of life

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. John 12:3 (NRSV)

Read John 12:1-8

On this Sunday before the beginning of Holy Week, the appointed lessons for the day leave the Gospel of Luke and are taken from the Gospel of John. The themes shift as well from Jesus' public ministry of teaching and healing to the preparation for his passion, suffering, and death.

Jesus is in Bethany – a small village less than two miles east of Jerusalem and lying on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives – six days before the Passover at a meal in the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. The previous occasion Jesus had been in Bethany was when Lazarus was raised from the dead by Jesus (John 11). The very presence of Lazarus bears witness to Jesus as “the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25).

1. *What other stories do you recall of Mary and Martha?*
2. *What would the atmosphere be like with a resurrected Lazarus present in the room?*

The reaction to this miracle of the raising of Lazarus is prophetic and points to what is to come. The high priest and the ruling religious council recognize the growing threat Jesus poses as stories of his miraculous works spread among the people. Any uprising could bring the force of the oppressive Roman army. So the religious leaders begin to plan how to put Jesus to death (John 11:53). Jesus' suffering and death are looming in the near future.

3. *Why was the raising of Lazarus seen as a threat?*

In contrast, the reaction of Mary to the presence of Jesus (who had brought her brother back to life) is that of extravagant love. She ignores the proper customs of the day, lets her hair down (an act only a woman of ill repute would do in the presence of men other than her husband), and anoints Jesus' feet with expensive perfume. The reader is told the perfume was made of pure nard – a fragrant oil made from the root and hair stem of the nard plant which grows in the mountains of northern India – and was worth 300 denarii (almost a year's wage). The perfume was often used in burial preparation.

4. *Imagine the scene and the fragrance in the room. What do you think the reaction of those present would be?*

Mary's act of intimacy and extravagant love foreshadows Jesus' death and burial. The practicality of her action is challenged by Judas Iscariot (John 12:5-6); but practicality is not the governing rule in love. Jesus recognizes her humble expression of devotion and acknowledges the significance of what she has done. She has shown her love to the one who has given her brother life and who will soon give his life for her.

5. *How would you express your love to someone who has saved a family member's life?*
6. *How do we express our love to Jesus who has given his life for us?*

Note: The last verse of the text, “You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me” (John 12:8) can be problematic. Raymond Brown, in his commentary on the Gospel of John, explains that in rabbinic theology, there were two classifications of good works: those that pertain to mercy (e.g. the burial ritual) and those that pertain to justice (e.g., almsgiving). The former were looked upon as more perfect than the latter. (Raymond Brown, The Gospel According to John I-XII, page 449)

word among us

O. Henry writes a story of a young couple, Della and Jim, who were very poor but also were very much in love. Each had a unique possession they treasured. For Della, it was her hair – long, full, and beautiful. For Jim, it was a pocket watch given from his grandfather to his father to him. It was Christmas Eve, and all the money Della had for a gift for her beloved was \$1.87 (mostly in coins). But she had an idea. She went and had her hair cut off, and sold it for twenty dollars. With the money, she bought a beautiful chain for Jim’s watch.

She anxiously waited for Jim to come home from work, not knowing how he would respond to her new look. When he came in, he was in shock, not because of her hair, but because of his gift for her – a set of expensive tortoise-shell combs with jeweled edges for her hair, bought with the money he was given for selling his prized possession – his family pocket watch. (O. Henry, The Gift of the Magi)

1. Describe an example of selfless love in your life.

Such is the nature of extravagant love. It gives, even gives that which is most precious, for the sake of the one loved.

Mary of Bethany in our gospel reading for today set aside the cultural standards of the day, rolled up her sleeves, let her hair down, broke open a priceless jar of perfume, and humbly washed Jesus’ feet. The fragrance of selfless love permeated the room. And fragrance evokes strong memories. As the oil washed over Jesus’ calloused feet, perhaps the sweet smell of the perfume reminded Mary of the fragrance of the oils used to prepare her brother Lazarus’ lifeless body for burial. Perhaps the fragrance cast a certain sadness like a pall over the room – a foreshadowing of painful things to come for Jesus ... and for Mary.

How else could she have expressed her love for one who brought her dead brother back to life? A humble spirit, an intimate expression of devotion, the finest gift – how could she give anything less to one who taught her of God’s love as she sat at his feet, whose feet she now caressed?

Indeed, how can we give anything less than our best gifts to one who has given his life for us? The words of the beautiful hymn *In the Bleak Mid-Winter* speak this truth:

*What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would give a lamb.
If I were a wise man, I would do my part. Yet what can I give him, give my heart.*

2. Take some time to name some of the things God in Christ has done for you.
3. What are some ways you can express your love for Jesus?

Prayer

What wondrous love is this, O loving Jesus, that you would give your life for me. Mold and shape my life in this love, that I might be a living expression of your love in everything I say and do. Amen.

Dig Deeper

John 11:1-44

last word

Take time this week to reflect on what God has done for you.
Offer a prayer of thanks.

