

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Watertown, WI**

**“Mary, the Sister of Lazarus and Martha”**

Witnesses to Christ – Lent, 2022

John 12:1-11

This Lent we are going to have a look at a number of those witnesses to Christ’s suffering and death in the Gospel according to John. The first we’ll consider is Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus.

We know from Scripture that Martha, Mary and Lazarus were good friends of Jesus. He stayed at their home on numerous occasions there in Bethany, just two miles outside of Jerusalem. Who can forget the time when Martha worked herself into an angry lather while her sister Mary sat at the feet of Jesus and learned from Him? And later, when Lazarus became deathly ill, the sisters sent word to Jesus through a messenger, thinking it would be reasonable to ask Jesus to come and heal His friend. The messenger returned, but not with Jesus. Though available for everyone else, apparently Jesus was not available for His friend Lazarus. Martha and Mary can hardly believe it as Lazarus slips into active dying. It’s all surreal, in part because Jesus hasn’t come. By the time He does show up in Bethany, Lazarus has already been dead and entombed for four days! Did the sisters resent it? You bet they did. First one, then the other: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” The neighbors are also shocked and offended. “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

Well, you remember what happened. “Lazarus, come out.” Not even a corpse can resist that voice. And the dead man came out.

For the Jewish authorities, this was the last straw. By raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus moves from the category of “manageable nuisance” to that of “serious threat.” Quote, “From that day on they made plans to put Him to death” (Jn. 11:53). And the next verse, “Therefore Jesus no longer walked openly among the Jews.” But Passover is on the horizon, and that’s when Jesus will enter Jerusalem in a very public way, and the Jews will use that as their opportunity to put Him to death.

That’s John chapter 11. Now, as we come into John chapter 12, the Passover is just six days. Jesus has come back to Bethany. And a crowd shows up not just to see Jesus but also to get a glimpse of Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So, verse 11 says, “The chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus” (Jn. 12:11). Now both Jesus and Lazarus have a target on their backs.

That’s the context for what happens next. Once again, Jesus is in the home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus. They’re having a feast in His honor. Surely, they know the danger they are in, but this is also a joyful, grateful occasion. Martha is serving, this time not in a frenzy. Lazarus is among those reclining at the table with Jesus. Mary sees her opportunity and taking a pint of very expensive perfume (about two cups worth) she pours it out on Jesus’ feet, all of it, to the last drop. Then she wipes down his feet with her hair. John remembers the whole “house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.” Sounds like an understatement. Just a couple of spritzes can be overpowering. This was a pint. And how much did it all cost? John tells us: about a year’s wages. Can you imagine ever giving a year’s wages away . . . on something like that? Something that’s not even tangible? After all, this isn’t going to build a Christian school in Kenya. It’s not for refugees from Ukraine. It’s not for Watertown’s food pantry. It’s just a big, extravagant, hugely expensive gesture of love and gratitude. It literally evaporates into thin air.

Judas noticed the extravagance. He did some quick math in his head and decided he didn’t like the gesture. “Why wasn’t this ointment sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” In recounting the incident, John can’t help himself but add a little commentary: “He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it” (vv. 4-6).

Sometimes we think Judas’ treachery and duplicity began the moment he accepted the thirty pieces of silver to betray Jesus. But no, it began much earlier than that, and in much more subtle ways. It probably began when he stopped paying any attention to the message of Jesus and stopped believing the message. It continued as

he followed Jesus with his body, but not with his heart. And here, it continues when he objects to Mary's gesture of love and gratitude. Here, he sounds so like 2022. "Why wasn't this ointment sold and the money given to the poor?" He signals his virtues; he signals his moral superiority, and yet he's bankrupt of both.

In any case, the contrast between Mary and Judas could not be stronger. Mary is a generous disciple. Judas is a greedy disciple. Mary gives with abandon. Judas is miserly. Mary sacrifices financially. Judas doesn't sacrifice anything. Mary shows her faith with actions. Judas talks a good game – about giving money to the poor – but his words are two-faced and treacherous. Mary loves to give. Judas prefers to get. Get more. Get ahead. Get on top. And the tragedy of it all is it won't make Judas happy. It's going to make him depressed and despondent and ultimately, it's going to kill him.

What happens next? Jesus accepts Mary's gesture. He accepts her extravagance. He receives the gift of her heart and tells Judas, "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial." I don't fully understand the statement, but what is clear is that Jesus knows his passion and death are just a few days away now, and somehow Mary's precious perfume has anointed Jesus for just that purpose. Mary gives Jesus everything she has and in so doing, she prepares Jesus to give everything He has. That perfume was likely her most precious asset. An extravagant gift to begin with, and ever more so by pouring it over His feet. It was not a prudent move. She probably couldn't afford it, and that is what true giving is: the giving away of what we cannot afford, parting with what we would rather keep, giving away what could be saved for ourselves. Jesus does the same. His life is on the line. What's more precious than that? To give it away is not a prudent thing to do. Who can afford to do that? Absolutely extravagant. But that's what He does. The Messiah has now been anointed by Mary to do what He has come to do, to lay down his life for the sins of the world.

The fact that Jesus receives her gesture is also a compelling part of this account. He accepts her gift, and in so doing, He accepts her. After all, a gift is a symbol of the giver. The girl accepts the ring because she accepts the giver of the ring, and when she rejects the ring, she rejects the giver of the ring. So, in the old etiquette books for young women, they were warned to be very careful about what gifts they could and could not accept from boys. Jesus accepts Mary and her gift, and the house is filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

I wonder how long the perfume lingered on Jesus. The very next day Jesus would enter Jerusalem to cries of Hosanna. After that, things unfold very quickly and He is soon arrested. Mary gave extravagantly to Jesus who was about to give extravagantly to us. Jesus gave Himself completely – all His love and mercy and grace. He held nothing back. He gave it all.

And I wonder how long that perfume lingered in the house. Just a spritz endures on clothing for a couple of days. This was a pint. And smells are powerful in other ways too. While words go to the thinking part of our brain, smells go to the emotional part. My guess is when Mary came home on that horrible Friday, and was met with the lingering aroma of the perfume, it made her weep for Jesus anew.

In Word and in deed, Jesus taught the kingdom of God is not about hoarding. It's not about stockpiling. It's not even about being prudent and thrifty and frugal, all good German values. The kingdom of God isn't about getting more, getting ahead, getting on top. God's kingdom is about giving, it's about grace, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

To be clear, there is nothing we can give to Jesus that would make Him love us any more than He already does. There is no perfume so rare and precious that it would compel Him to forgive you any more perfectly than He already has. If God's love and forgiveness in Christ is anything, it is free. It is a gift.

And giving creates joy. The giving of Jesus creates the ultimate joy. Psalm 16, "In his presence there is fullness of joy" (v. 11). The giving of Jesus, the gift of Jesus has and will create for us the fullness of joy in his presence.

Giving creates joy. I don't think Mary ever regretted the gift she gave. We know Judas deeply regretted his decisions. Striving always to get more sucked the joy right out of him, and ended up being the death of him. But wherever it happens, giving creates joy.

So, hear again the Good News. Jesus gave His life for you. In Him, you are forgiven and loved and accepted. In Him you have eternal life. Even as we enter into the season of repentance with ashen crosses on our foreheads, it points ultimately to Jesus, and the joy we have, because of His giving. Amen.