

John 12:1-11 [NIV]

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ² Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. ³ Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

⁴ But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, ⁵ "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." ⁶ He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

⁷ "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. ⁸ You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."

⁹ Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰ So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, ¹¹ for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and believing in him.

We're in John 12 this morning, if you'd like to turn back there with me. The 12th chapter of John.

I wonder if you've ever been in a situation where you're in the home of some friends, and, just totally out of the blue, someone there does something or says something so unexpected and unusual that it makes everyone else uncomfortable, and no one knows what to say or do?

Like someone dropped a bomb right in the middle of an otherwise normal gathering of friends.

I've really tried to think of a time that something like that happened in my life – you know, like an illustration – and I just could not think of one, which, I guess, illustrates the dreary predictability of my life.

The closest thing I could come up with was when, shortly after we were married, Annette and I were going to the home of some of my college friends for dinner – her first time with them like that.

I thought I knew the way to their home, but we got lost. This was out in the country and before cell phones, and so we were a little over an hour late. This was bad enough, but just as we were finally pulling into their driveway, I remembered that I told them we'd bring dessert, about which, of course, Annette knew nothing.

So, you might say a small "A-bomb" went off in our car just before we went into their house.

But that's as close as I could come.

Have you ever been with a group of friends where something happened that left everybody speechless? If you have, well, you live a more exciting life than I do – but no more exciting than Jesus, because that very thing happened to him.

The account that was read for us is considered by most to be the beginning of what we call the "Passion of Jesus."

Of course, the word "passion," in this context, means something very different than what we think of when we hear it today.

When the Church talks about, "The Passion of Christ," she's referring to all that happened in the last week or so of Jesus' life – His arrest, His trial, His flogging, His execution – all that Jesus went through for our sake there, we call His "passion," and we call it that because the English word, "passion," comes from the Latin word "passio," or "passionem," which means "suffering" or "enduring."

So, the "passion" of Jesus is the *suffering* of Jesus – all that He did – all He *endured* for our redemption.

And it all started, strangely – ironically, in the home of a friend.

As you realize when you reach the point of Jesus' crucifixion, Jesus had very few real friends. He had a number of followers. He had *lots* of fans. He had acquaintances, and He had enemies.

But Jesus did not have many friends.

And yet the friends He did have invited Him to their home for dinner one night.

Now, whose home was this?

Since we're told that Martha was serving, some have presumed that the home belonged to her and Mary and Lazarus, Martha's sister and brother.

But if you believe Matthew and Mark give an account of this same event, as most people do, they both tell us plainly that the home belonged to someone named Simon – Simon the Leper, he's called. ¹

It has been suggested that this Simon was a relative and maybe even the father of Mary and Martha and Lazarus, so it could have been their home. It has also been suggested that Simon had been healed by Jesus of his leprosy, since he wouldn't have been present if he were still sick with that, and so Simon invited Him as his guest as a gesture of appreciation.

That could all be true, but we don't know for sure.

We do know, however, that this dinner – this gathering – was one of friends. This evening was to be, for Jesus, what homes of friends are supposed to be: places of refuge, places of calm, places of trust and confidence and peace.

You know you're in the home of a true friend when there is no pretension – no posturing going on, no showing off, no threat to security or well-being or danger of betrayal.

¹ Matthew 26:6; Mark 14:3

The home of a real friend is a place where you can let down your hair (should you have it to let down).

And that was what this was supposed to be for Jesus. And initially it was. You can picture the setting: it was one of happiness and celebration.

The whole of the Jewish nation was on the cusp of Passover, a high and holy national day and season of celebration.

And then, on top of that, Lazarus had not been risen long, so that was a reason to celebrate as well. There would have been lots of laughing and talking, answering questions about what his whole “back-from-the-dead” experience was like.

You know, people were surely asking him, “So how did it feel to be dead and then alive again? Did you see a bright light? Was there a strong smell of flowers? Or maybe cinnamon rolls? Did you see anyone you knew? What kind of cars were there?” I’m sure people were asking Lazarus all those very important sorts of things, and he was happily responding to their questions.

A great thing happened to Lazarus, and he was full of happiness and gratitude that spilled over into the home.

You know I wonder if you and I are full of happiness and gratitude today because Jesus has delivered us from something terrible? Maybe even something fatal?

Is our home, today, to Jesus, the home of a true friend?

And then, of course, we’re told that Martha was there, serving and delivering food, keeping cups filled, cleaning up, doing all those things she was naturally inclined to do.

But you see, now, in this case, she was doing these things with contentment and not complaint.

Just as Lazarus had been changed by Jesus, so had Martha been changed by Jesus.

Not all that long ago, Martha had been overtaken by earthly responsibilities and had become frustrated and angry that her sister, Mary, was not helping her. Jesus had to gently but firmly remind her that although service was a tremendous thing to give oneself to, service – even service to God – without a compassionate and soft heart toward people was not only not good, but if it were left unchecked, it would consume her – destroy her.

Jesus showed her how much better it is to cultivate a soft heart toward God and people – as Mary did – than to be a complaining, critical, judgmental servant, no matter how efficient.

And Martha learned that lesson, and so she was still a servant at heart, but now she was able to serve in love and with freedom and joy, you see?

And if you consider all the people who were here in this home for this particular gathering – all the disciples and everyone, there were, it seems, *way more here* than were present before. So Martha’s ability to serve was actually expanded.

Before she served *few* with a *critical* heart.

Here, she serves *many* with a *compassionate* heart.

So, you see, Martha is another who had been changed because of Jesus, and she was now full of joy.

I wonder if you are full of joy about the way you approach something today – maybe your work, maybe another person – because Jesus made a change in you? You used to be so consumed with something – with stuff, with performance – that it made you crazy and actually rude to the people around you, but Jesus delivered you from that, and now joy flows, again, through your life and home?

Is your home, to Jesus, the home of a true friend?

And then there was another person present at this party who was full of joy because of Jesus – and that was Mary.

Mary, who was so upset, it seems, with Jesus when He had, in her mind, let her brother, Lazarus, die.

But now she’s, you might say, back to her old self. With Lazarus alive again, and an important lesson in timing learned, her confidence and trust in Jesus were restored, and, in her happiness and love and appreciation for Jesus, she does this tremendous thing: she takes a jar of super-expensive perfume and pours it out on Jesus.

Matthew and Mark say she poured it on His head; John says she poured it on His feet. Probably she poured it all over Him.

In that culture, it was not an unusual act of honor and love to wash and put a bit of perfume on a guest’s feet.

If people tried that today someone would probably call the police, but a sign of honor like this was not unusual in Jesus’ time.

But something like Mary did – to this degree – was very unusual. What Mary poured on Jesus was worth nearly a year’s wages for a typical day-laborer.

What is that in today’s terms? \$25,000.00? \$30,000.00?

You see, the stuff was so strong that only a little was ever really needed; a bottle of it was meant to last for years and years. But Mary dumped it all out on Jesus, and we’re told the scent filled the room, as you’d imagine it would.

There was nothing subtle about what she did – because there was nothing subtle about her love for Jesus.

Mary had always chosen what was best, even if, at times, she wondered about, and maybe even doubted, Jesus. Even then, though, Mary was always close by Him, always ready to listen, always ready to learn. Never far away.

Extravagant in her love and willing to express it at any cost: that was Mary, and Jesus loved that about her. It made being her friend a pleasure.

Does your love for Jesus supersede any earthly person or thing? Are you so full of love for Him that you’re willing to express that love at any cost?

Is your home, to Jesus, the home of a true friend?

So, you see, in this home, in this gathering, there was all this happiness, all this light-heartedness, all this camaraderie and friendship in a time when Jesus really needed it.

But then – the bomb goes off! Right there in the middle of all this beautiful friendship, the bomb goes off!
“*What in the world do you think you’re doing?!*”

Matthew and Mark politely say, "Some of those present said it," but John makes it clear: it came from Judas.

It wasn't an "A-bomb." It was a "J-bomb."

In verse 5 there, Judas says, "*That was a year's wages you just dumped out! Why wasn't that perfume sold and the money given to the poor?*"

And that stopped it all. All the laughter. All the smiles. All the story-telling and joking and warm-hearted connecting that happens in homes of friends.

Suddenly there was silence.

And you know that everyone looked at Jesus. I can't prove that, but you know that's what happened.

Everyone looked at Jesus because, well, what Judas said was true, and everybody knew it—and probably most people there in their sensibilities agreed.

You see, these were not wealthy people. These weren't inherited-money, living-in-the-lap-of-luxury, Paris Hilton, carry-a-dog-in-your-purse, *que sera sera* sorts of people.

These were normal people.

And when they smelled that scent wafting through the room—through the house, they probably all reacted the way nearly all of us would have reacted: they looked at Mary with wide eyes, and under their breath they said, "Woah! She just dumped a lot of money there."

And then they heard Judas' words.

And then they looked at Jesus, because, well, everyone knew how Jesus felt about the poor. He did everything He could to help the poor. He preached about the poor. He preferred the poor. He healed the poor. He blessed the poor. He gave His stuff away for the sake of the poor.

And now, He's wearing the liquid—the goo (I don't know exactly the consistency), but He's wearing the scent that could have fed the poor for a long time.

This was a major collision of ideas and priorities and thinking that took place here. And probably everyone there, when they first smelled it and then realized what had happened, shook their heads and thought, "Oh that silly girl—what has she done?!"

Now, because of friendship, no one would have said anything. Because of the grace of love, they didn't say what they were thinking.

That's what keeps our mouths shut at times—the grace of love that we have toward a friend who expressed maybe the dumbest opinion we've ever heard. It's grace born of love for him or her that keeps us from saying, "Are you nuts?"

And we need that kind of grace. We've really needed it this past year, haven't we?

It's that kind of grace that keeps friendships together; it keeps families together; it keeps couples together; it keeps churches together.

The grace, frankly, to just ignore things from time to time; to keep our opinion to ourselves in certain moments; to have the wisdom to choose our conflicts and words and timing carefully; to know whether or not, in the grand scheme of things, this issue, this difference, is really worth pursuing either at all, or in this moment.

The grace to stop and think, and then maybe wait, maybe rephrase, maybe pray before you open your mouth.

In this case—on that day—certainly there was a very real ideological conflict in what happened.

There was an intersection of devotion and practicality, of design and function, of beauty and economics, that would certainly raise questions—reasonable questions—in a circle of friends.

It does today.

When building a sanctuary, do we put in beautiful windows in honor of the beauty of God, or do we put in plain windows and give the money to missions?

Devotion or practicality?

Beauty or frugality?

Aesthetic or function?

Those things come up all the time, and, in that circle of friends gathered in love on that day, in that moment everyone there determined that Mary dumping a year's salary over Jesus' head was an insufficient thing to, if you'll pardon the expression, make a stink over, at least in that moment. Everyone, that is, *except* Judas. Judas simply had to speak—which speaks to the remarkable power that self-interest can exert in a person's life.

He cloaked his words in spirituality and responsibility and holiness and concern for the poor—certainly he did.

But it was really Judas' concern for self that motivated him and moved him to speak. John lets us know that, because to have put that money into the treasury, you see, meant putting at least a part of it into Judas' own pocket—and that's what he wanted.

It wasn't about the poor at all, nor about Mary or Jesus or anyone else. It was only about Judas.

It was concern for self that skewed Judas' perspective and that didn't allow him the grace to even wonder whether or not his thoughts were valid.

It was concern for self that kept from Judas the grace to keep his mouth shut long enough to even think it through.

It was concern for self that kept Judas from seeing that what Mary did was really none of his business.

It was concern for self that blinded Judas to the beauty in Mary's offering—the purity of Mary's motive.

Concern for self—demanding that we get our way: it's a destroyer of grace. The two can't survive in the same room, which is why self-interest is the prime destroyer of relationships.

And when left to its ends, self-interest is the prime destroyer of individuals—persons—because self-interest is the polar opposite of the character of God that we witness in Jesus.

To some degree, it probably surprised everyone there that Jesus defended Mary as He did.

In His defense, He didn't condemn Judas—Jesus still wanted Judas' redemption.

And neither did Jesus diminish the poor or the need to be concerned for the poor.

But He did defend Mary, and not just what she did, but why she did it.

Mary acted in pure, selfless love – the kind of love that exists among friends, in the homes of friends, and especially among Christian friends. And Jesus will always defend that, because that’s the very character that He died to make possible in His Church: a Holy Spirit-empowered, Christ-centered love that, in the truth of God, prioritizes others.

According to Jesus, that’s the essence of what God wants us to do: love Him and love others as we love ourselves.

You know, there may have never existed in one room – before or since – a greater contrast than this one we see between the action of Mary and the reaction of Judas.

It’s really nothing less than the difference between Heaven and Hell.

Everybody I know wants to live in a Heaven with people like Mary, but how often do we treat others like Judas’ Hell?

You see, Jesus will always *defend* Heaven-inspired *selflessness*, and Jesus will always *confront* Hell-inspired *selfishness*.

And though we may try to deceive Him, as Judas tried, Jesus will always know our true motives.

And yet even today He invites all of us to Himself and calls us to transformation of heart. He wants to make us more like Mary and less like Judas.

Jesus died to make it possible, and He sent His Spirit to make it real, and even today, He invites us to Himself for a deep transformation, so that our home may be to Him and to His people a Heavenly home – a home of true friendship.

If you need Jesus to do that sort of work in you today, would you invite Him – welcome Him to have His way.

Closing Hymn: *Breathe On Me, Breath of God*

Benediction:

We know what happened to Judas. Interestingly, this is the last we hear in Scripture of Lazarus and Martha. But Jesus tells us in both Matthew’s and Mark’s accounts of this event that what Mary did will be told in memory of her – all over the world.²

That’s not only to honor Mary’s pure heart. That’s the proclamation of the intended end of the gospel message – the very gospel we’re called to proclaim is the good news: that a transformed, Christ-like, others-centered, pure heart is possible, even for the worst of us.

With the help of Christ, may every one of us know the truth of that and live out it’s evidence before our world.

² Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9