

John 12:1-11  
March 21, 2010

South Plains

### A Royal Waste of Nard

Can you imagine anyone buying a pound of perfume? Even cheap perfume is sold by the ounce or half ounce. A pound of costly perfume like the nard in the anointing of Jesus at Bethany would cost the earth. In fact, John estimates that it cost about what a common farm laborer would make in one year's work. I figure that's a minimum of \$15,000 in our money for the nard Mary pours on Jesus' feet.

We know that foot-washing in biblical times was not unusual. When an honored guest arrived in someone's home, they would be dusty from the hot, unpaved roads. A servant might remove their sandals and bathe their tired feet. It was an act of hospitality, much as we welcome a traveler to our home by showing him or her to the bathroom to freshen up. Mary and her sister Martha wanted to make a fuss over Jesus, because he was not only their friend, he had brought their brother Lazarus back to life.

We can think of the ointment Mary used as an ancient cosmetic. Wealthy people would oil their bodies after bathing. Nard has also been used medicinally. But, in Israel, anointing with oil or ointment carried far greater significance. Prophets and priests were anointed as an act of consecration for their religious duties. The most

important consecration, however, was when a new king was inaugurated. Anointing symbolized the granting of divine authority and power. Remember the story of David who was anointed king by Samuel when he was still a shepherd boy. No one called him the king of Israel at that point, but from that moment he began his rise to become king because the blessing of God Almighty rested upon him. The power of the Holy Spirit was with him. By the time of Jesus, the Jewish people expected God to send another "anointed one" to save Israel from her enemies and to restore the kingdom. The title they used for "the anointed one" is "Messiah" or "Christ."

When Mary anointed the feet of Jesus, she was acknowledging him as the powerful, life-giving king and prophet and priest of Israel, the expected Savior, the Christ of God. This was an act of prophetic defiance. A new priest would mean a revolution in the religious establishment because the priesthood had made their peace with Rome; they had carved out their place in society and protected their turf. A new king required a political revolution because Pilate and the Jewish rulers owed their allegiance to the pagan Emperor in Rome. Mary, the quiet one who was overshadowed and bossed around by her busy sister Martha, Mary the pious Jewish woman restricted to the women's court of the temple, this is the person who anoints the Messiah with extravagant perfume.

Can you imagine the experience from Jesus' perspective? His friend is caressing his feet, rubbing out

the weariness, softening the calluses, washing away not only road grime, but also the memory of the day's tension – jousts with the Pharisees, explanations for slow disciples, the anxious anticipation of Passover. It's a pleasant sensation, a little extraordinary because Mary is not using plain water. But for someone with no place to lay his head, it's a welcome respite from the journey. The scent, however, is another matter. It fills the house with a sweet fragrance that overpowers any memory of the stench of Lazarus' tomb. This is more than hospitality, Jesus knows.

The novelist Vladimir Nabokov wrote, "Smells are surer than sights or sounds to make your heartstrings crack."

Then, things take an even more surprising turn. Mary allows her long tresses to fall on Jesus' feet. Instead of a towel, her hair wipes away the excess ointment. She is taking the residue of dirt on herself. In a very literal way, Jesus feels the love and adoration she has for him.

This is too much for Judas. He quickly calculates the cost of so much nard. "Why was this perfume not sold for 300 denarii and the money given to the poor?" The spell is broken and a beautiful moment is spoiled. The gospel writer believes that Judas wanted that 300 denarii under his control so he could skim a little off the top for himself.

We're all familiar with that kind of calculation. Anything we do in worship takes time and we all know that time is money. Wouldn't we do more good by building a Habitat House on Sunday morning instead of coming to worship? Should we really heat and cool a sanctuary that we use once or twice a week? Why get dressed up in order to worship a God who is invisible? Marva Dawn's book on keeping the Sabbath is entitled "A Royal Waste of Time." She makes the point that worship is not supposed to accomplish anything except to worship and glorify God. Mary's gift is a royal waste of nard.

But that's not what Judas is about. He makes a mistake we see too often in the church. He mistakes discipline for discipleship. He wants to follow the rules instead of following Jesus. The softness of love, the sloppiness of adoration, the extravagance of worship is lost on Judas. And, we also can lose sight of worship when we put all our emphasis on doing what is prudent and acceptable and profitable or to our advantage.

Of course it's not a question of either worshipping or doing the right thing by the poor or by the book. The most extravagant act of devotion to Jesus by South Plains has been some of the gifts we have made to others. I believe one of the most healing things we can do for this community is to pray for the poor, the lonely, and the sick. When we worship rightly, we acknowledge the Maker of heaven and earth as the One who judges the way our taxes are spent, the way we make our living, and

the time we spend with others. Every Sunday we worship in God's eyes with our sister church, the Presbyterian Church of Grenada. Worship integrates our life, makes it whole, brings us together around the central core values of our humanity – the love of God incarnate in Christ.

Jesus gently rebukes Judas with a reference to the book of Deuteronomy where the law of Moses says not only that the poor will always be with us, but adds that we should therefore be generous with poor and needy neighbors (Deuteronomy 15:11). He also expands the symbolism of Mary's devotion by calling the ointment a perfume for his burial. Jesus will die as the anointed king.

That is the new thing the prophet Isaiah promises without knowing exactly what God will do. "I am about to do a new thing, now it springs forth, do you not perceive it (Isaiah 43:19)?" The expected Messiah is anointed by a woman. The revolution will start with the death of God's chosen One. And, it will be fulfilled with his resurrection. Until the time of our resurrection, we buy and sell. We fill out our time sheets and calculate our investments. Our calendars divide time between work and family and leisure. We squeeze in time for those we love and we budget our expenses. And, when we seek wholeness, we worship. We worship with the extravagance of adoration, a royal waste.