

A Storytelling Commentary on John 12:1-8

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For congregations following the lectionary, John's story of Mary anointing Jesus at Bethany is told on the last Sunday of Lent before Palm Sunday. It is a story of the preparations for Jesus' passion, death, and burial. This is a passionate story. I want to talk about that aspect because it has often either been eliminated or minimized in the telling and interpretation of this story.

The ointment that Mary uses to anoint Jesus is described with a phrase that is also present in Mark's story of the anointing. In Mark the Greek phrase is, *muru nardu pistacase palotaloose*. John picks up that same phrase, *muru nardu pistacase palotamu*. It is a luxuriously liquid sound that conveys through the sound of the words the character of the ointment. The storytellers loved this phrase. You have to hear it in Greek. The closest we can get in English is "luxurious and luscious."

It is unfortunately translated as "perfume." Perfume comes in a little bottle and is used on a woman's body. You apply it in tiny drops behind the ear or on the wrist in order to have a nice fragrance. Perfume can be expensive, but often is not.

In contrast, the ointment in our story was used by both men and women. It was imported from India and was the most expensive ointment available in Israel in Jesus' day. A pound of this ointment would not have been a pound of "perfume." A pound of ointment would come in a jar that's about 3 inches high and 5-6 inches in diameter. That is a big jar of ointment! The fragrance from this substance that Mary used to anoint Jesus' feet was the most precious thing one could imagine, and as the story says, it would fill the whole house.

Some commentaries assert that Mary wouldn't put perfume on Jesus' feet and then wipe it off with her hair. I don't think they understand what was going on here. Mary was massaging Jesus' feet with this ointment and then as an act of passionate love, letting her hair down and rubbing the ointment into his feet with her hair. Now in the ancient world, the only time that a woman would take her hair down was when she was making love. Therefore, the description of Mary wiping Jesus' feet with her hair is an expression of intense love and it is highly sensual. It is a supreme gift of love that Mary is giving to Jesus in preparation for his burial.

There is a puzzling mistranslation in the NRSV. The NRSV reads, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." Furthermore, a note in the text says that the Greek lacks "she bought it." This is true; there is nothing that communicates the words "she bought it" in the Greek. The translator just made that up because he had an idea about what it meant. The meaning is quite clear if it is translated more literally, "Let her alone in order that she may keep it for the day of my burial." What Jesus is saying is, "Let her alone. She kept it so that she can anoint me for the day of my burial, that is, now."

Now that didn't happen when Jesus died because he was crucified and his body could not be anointed. In John, Nicodemus and Joseph of Aramithea wrapped his body in 100 pounds of spices. John emphasizes the gifts of royal honor for Jesus in relation to his burial. That is the norm present in the story of Mary anointing Jesus' feet. Mary is doing an extravagant act of love and devotion in anticipation of his death.

What is implied in Jesus' statement—"Let her alone so that she may keep it for the day of my burial"—is that Mary didn't use all the ointment in anointing his feet. This makes complete sense, because to use a pound of ointment on his feet would be virtually impossible. The implication is that this ointment, which was worthy of a king, is used by Mary to communicate her love for him. The cultural norms in relation to the anointing were virtually universal in the ancient world. This was a supreme gift of love that a woman could give to a man. And ancient people did extravagant things for the deaths of their kings like, for example, building pyramids.

Judas' intervention is jarring. His words are introduced as coming from a disciple who is about to betray him. John has no compassion for Judas. He is described as a betrayer and his words are harsh: "Why wasn't this sold for 300 hundred denari and the money given to the poor?" John then explains that Judas didn't care about the poor; he kept the common purse because he was a thief. He would even steal from the funds that he managed for Jesus and his disciples. Don't follow modern efforts to construe Judas as a kind of hero. In the Gospel of John he is a crook and a traitor.

Maximum alienation from Judas is the goal of this part of the story. It is a highly negative characterization. It is fully appropriate in the telling to express contempt and disgust, to speak with a tone of condemnation. Nevertheless, Jesus' response to Judas' intervention—"Let her alone"—is relatively mild toward Judas. You might relay Jesus' words here with a tone of impatience.

The story ends with Jesus' quotation about the poor: "You will always have the poor with you but you will not always have me." His comment reflects a tradition in Jewish culture that acts of mercy, especially prior to death, are of supreme worth. Even acts of justice in defense of the poor are second in value to actions that are done in mercy prior to death.

So this is an extremely poignant story that begins with a description of the dinner that Lazarus and Mary and Martha gave for Jesus, clearly in gratitude for his raising Lazarus and giving him new life. The anointing of Jesus' feet by Mary is a gesture of supreme love to which Judas responds with hostility. But Jesus recognizes what she has done and asks Judas to recognize it as a supreme act of mercy prior to his death. Judas never understood who Jesus was and what he was doing. But Mary understood.

You can tell the story with real passion.