

The story of a woman anointing Jesus with oil or perfume appears in all four gospels. In Matthew and Mark, it is clearly an anointing in preparation for his death and burial. Appearing early in Luke’s gospel, it is more an act of devotion. In John, the act combines devotion and anointing, and John alone names the woman as Jesus’ friend, Mary, and the objector as Jesus’ disciple, Judas.

As is John’s style, there are some asides that appear in parentheses. They are footnotes, explanations offered by John and meant for the reader. In our reading, he wants to fill us in on Judas’ motivation and character, and our second reader will speak John’s asides in our lesson in John 12:1-8:

*Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup>There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. <sup>3</sup>Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them<sup>x</sup> with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. <sup>4</sup>But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples*

***(the one who was about to betray him),***

*said, <sup>5</sup>‘Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii<sup>x</sup> and the money given to the poor?’*

*<sup>6</sup>**(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.)***

*<sup>7</sup>Jesus said, ‘Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup>You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.’*

I’m always amazed how the smell of a dead skunk on the side of the road can fill and remain in a car for miles. There is the foul odor coming from the pantry, and upon careful searching a rotting potato is uncovered. Smoke damage can leave an oily film on walls and floors and ceilings, but what lingers is a heavy smell that hangs in the house even with the windows wide open. We know about unpleasant, lingering odors that can fill a car, room, or whole house.

In contrast, it is a fragrant smell that fills the home of Jesus’ friends, Lazarus, Martha and Mary, as Mary breaks open a flask of pure nard, worth a year’s wages, and lavishly pours it over Jesus’ feet and wipes it with her hair. Yet, this smell is linked to one even more overwhelming than a skunk, rotten potato, or smoke. Turn back the pages of John just a chapter and Mary’s sister, Martha tells Jesus, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” One can only imagine.

It was Mary’s and Martha’s brother, Lazarus, who had been dead four days. Jesus had first been told of his illness, and then received word of his death. He traveled to console his friends. Upon his arrival, Mary had told him if he had been there Lazarus would not have died. Long story short, Jesus calls for Lazarus to come out of the tomb, and he does – we call the story the raising of Lazarus. There is no indication what happened to the stench, but at least figuratively, it wafts its way into our lesson.

Gospel writer John tells us it is six days before the Passover when Jesus is back at his friends' house for a meal. This will be Jesus' last Passover. He will soon ride a young donkey into Jerusalem. We know what follows. Death is near for Jesus.

Death is near for Jesus because Jesus has become a marked man. You don't raise someone from the dead, even if a close friend, without some consequences. The Jewish leaders face a dilemma, and it seems squarely centered on the question, "What will the Romans think and how will they respond?"

Over the ages, this has been a question posed by businesses, politicians, and even the church. What will our customers think if we do this? What will our base think if we they learn this about our candidate? What will our wealthier members think if we take this stand? And what will they do? Will they continue to buy our product, vote for our party, give to our church?

The Jewish Council has heard many Jews are believing in Jesus. They ask, "*What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.*" (John 11:47-48) We learn the plan to kill Jesus is a matter of national security, plotted by a few. Caiaphas puts it into words, "It is better to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." (John 11:50)

One writer reminds us these leaders are almost by necessity collaborators with a Roman government that had ultimate power. [Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009, p. 141.)] They had to walk a fine line as they sought rights and privileges for the Jewish people. Rome would grant rights if the leaders kept their people under control; if not, rights would be rescinded.

Jesus was now seen as having gone too far. They knew he had a following, but for the sake of the nation, better to have him arrested and plot his death. While Jesus is not deemed guilty of anything, he is a threat to the leaders' security responsibilities, and perhaps even the privileges they themselves enjoy from Rome. In this respect, we are wise not to blame Jesus' death on the Jewish people as a whole, but on those few who made a decision based on what Rome might think and do if they let Jesus continue in his ministry. "Better to have one man die." Oh, the decisions that take place by fallible humans, behind closed doors, about who might take the fall, or even have to die, convincing themselves it is for the "greater good."

The leaders' plot will play out following Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. But for today, it is as if the event in the house of his friends provides a respite, a moment of peace, a pause, sandwiched between a flurry of activity both before and after. Yet then, even in this house, the peace is broken when Judas' harsh words interrupt Mary's silent, loving act of devotion and anointing.

Judas' words seek to cause our sense of hearing to mask the pleasant sense of smell. Even Jesus responds to Judas' words, and what he says is often remembered, "The poor will always be with you." I have heard people who never quote Scripture remember this line, suggesting Jesus' words propose poverty can never be eliminated, or even that there is nothing we should do about or for the poor. They say, "Even Jesus said the poor would always be with us," as if Jesus thought poverty was a part of status quo.

In fact, Jesus is using just a phrase from a longer Jewish law. Think of the way we speak of “first amendment rights.” We don’t quote the whole law, but expect others will know we are speaking of the freedoms of press, speech, assembly, or the practice of religion. So what is the whole law to which Jesus refers? It is Deuteronomy 15:11, and in its whole, it is quite counter to how some have used Jesus’ words: *Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, [since the poor will always be with you] I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.”*

Jesus was by no means dismissing responsibility to care for the poor and needy. Yet, isn’t Judas right about the waste of a flask of perfume worth a year’s wages of a laborer? We might rightly ponder if Jesus might have stopped Mary before she cracked open the flask. Yet, I have to catch myself in such speculation, for it appeals to the head not the heart, my sense of hearing and not my sense of smell, and it is the smell that filled the house.

As I am drawn back into the intimacy of the scene, and the sweet aroma of the perfume, a deeper message emerges. I don’t hear Jesus offering a justification of extravagance, but a commentary on gratitude and devotion.

Recall Mary’s brother, Lazarus, has just been brought back to life. The flask of perfume could have been for him, but then one wonders why she did not use it. In any case, it is now offered to Jesus, who confirms its intent was for burial preparation. Very clearly the figurative, yet lingering stench of Lazarus’ tomb is now transformed by the smell of this perfume.

Yet, even deeper within the story is the verb John uses when Mary wipes Jesus’ feet with her hair. It is the same verb used when John later tells of Jesus wiping the feet of his disciples with a towel. After doing so, Jesus will speak of being servants to one another, and give the command for the disciples to love one another as Jesus has loved them. Mary’s silent act is one of love, and Judas missed it.

Judas missed it. How easy it is to miss it, often because we cannot imagine new things. Isaiah was concerned the people of Israel might miss God’s new act of deliverance as they returned from the Babylonian exile. The prophet seems to tell the people to forget the former things, but for a people often reminded to remember their past, this is not a call for full amnesia. I see it almost as a question and answer session between prophet and people:

Do you remember what God has done before? *Yes.*

Do you believe God can do so again? *Yes.*

Would you like God to do so again? *Yes, for we know the story; we know what to expect.*

Well, forget it! Forget what God did before, and don’t look for it to happen again, because God is doing a new thing, and you will miss it if you are looking for the old.

It seems Judas is stuck in the old story. Mary is entering the new one. Both are disciples of Jesus, and the challenge for both is to discover a new beginning amidst the lingering prospect of death. Judas, with words, indicates he doesn’t really understand the new thing about to happen, marking his discipleship has begun to fray. Mary, in silence, pours an extravagance of love over Jesus’ feet, marking the fullness of her discipleship she has entered.

New beginnings are easier to recognize and embrace if they mimic the old, offering familiarity and comfort. New beginnings are embraced if they clearly promise life and hope and sunshine and love. Yet, how do we smell new beginnings within the aura of death and despair?

Like the people of Israel, we live in an era of exile, times of uncertainty. The skunk, potato, and smoke are the acrid smells of violence, terror, and shouted words of bigotry and hatred that surround us like the Babylonians held Israel. We are also aware of the many voices that want us to consider, "What will the Romans think? What will my friends think? What will our big donors think?" These are the voices Judas represents as he watches and speaks in the house that day.

Yet, it is in the silent witness of Mary that we sense, even with the heaviness of an impending death, a new beginning. She showed discipleship is about a willingness to show an extravagance of love for another. Mary was able to set aside the "What will people think mindset of a Jewish Council, or perhaps even a Presbyterian session. With reckless abandon, which looked a lot like waste, she cracked open a flask of perfume and with deep gratitude, poured it out, caring more about what God will think. And she heard from Jesus, it smelled good to God.