

“The Prodigal Pint-Pourer”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
April 3, 2022 – Fifth Sunday in Lent
Isaiah 43:16-21; John 12:1-8

Ah, I love the smell of nard in the morning! OK, I admit, I don't know what nard actually smells like. Have you ever smelled pure nard? I imagine that it smells pretty nice. Mary of Bethany, along with the rest of her society certainly thought so. She thought so highly of the stuff, she had a pound of precious nard, perhaps a pint or so of oil, on hand in an expensive, alabaster jar. The aromatic oil itself was very expensive. We are told that back in the day, it cost 300 denarii, or about a year's wages for the average laborer. With the rate of inflation being what it is, who knows how pricy the stuff would be today! Well, I just checked online, and apparently the prices have come down a bit over the years as you can now get a third of an ounce of pure, Himalayan spikenard oil for about \$12, which is \$575 per pint. This is still pretty pricy, but in first century Palestine, a pint of nard was absolutely precious.

Perhaps Mary had a jar of the precious perfume on hand because it was intended to be applied to the body and burial cloths of her brother Lazarus after his death. But as Jesus called Lazarus forth from his tomb not long before the party described in today's reading, and Lazarus was alive and well again, she no longer needed it for its intended purpose. Instead, with a jar full of precious nard and a heart full of gratitude that Jesus returned her brother to life, she found the perfect way to use the pint of oil: By pouring it on Jesus' feet and wiping them with her hair. I imagine that the aroma stayed with Jesus throughout the following week, was still upon his feet when he rode upon a donkey into Jerusalem, was with him when he was arrested and tried before Pilate, and that the smell of Mary's gesture of love was still upon his feet when they were nailed to a cross, all reminding him, even in his darkest hour when he was despised and abandoned by so many, he was still loved and treasured by his friends.

Mary's pouring of nard upon Jesus' feet was a beautiful gesture of devotion and love, but it was a shocking and extravagant gesture. In the eyes of Jesus' disciple Judas, and perhaps many of the rest of us, it was a prodigal act (prodigal meaning extravagantly wasteful) and not a very practical one. Fortunately, the narrator of

the gospel steps in to tell us not to align our views too closely with those of Judas, who lamented that the nard had not been sold, not because he was thinking practically or actually cared for the poor he said should benefit from the nard's sale, but because he would have stolen some of the nard-fund and thus enriched himself. Judas was offended by Mary's act because he was not motivated by love or devotion as she was, but by greed.

Mary's selfless, generous, prodigal act was just like the prodigal acts of a loving father that we read about in last Sunday's lesson of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, a father who gave extravagantly out of his love for his younger child, extravagantly giving him his share of the family estate when asked; extravagantly and mercifully forgiving him after he squandered it all but returned home; extravagantly renewing his status in the household as a welcomed, beloved child; and extravagantly throwing him a fatted-calf cookout and dance party in celebration.

Mary acted just like this parable's loving parent, who is a symbol of our loving Creator, in her own shocking, uncommon, impractical, extravagant demonstration of love. Mary acted like God acts, and she provides a good example for us to follow as fellow disciples of Christ.

If only more of us would follow in the way of Mary, especially more of us who claim to follow Christ, the world would be greatly blessed! But too often, we choose instead to tread the path of Judas, motivated more by our greed than our generosity, concerned more about what we can get than what we can give. But as our Lenten journey continues, let us take the path of prodigal Mary. In this year's stewardship season, which begins next week, let us follow her lead and pledge to give extravagantly. In our worship, in our witness, in all of our ways -- always -- let us be like Mary and give to God gratefully and extravagantly. Amen.