

## Sermon- More Than Gratitude

Scripture: John 12:1-11

Sunday, April 7, 2019

Last week I had talked about how the high council's decision to put Jesus to death to "save" the Jews represented a pivot in the Jesus story unfolding before our eyes in the Gospel of John. Today starting in chapter 12 we enter part two then of the Jesus story. Some scholars refer to this part of John as the Farewell Cycle and it starts with Mary's anointing of Jesus.

Before we can focus on the message of today's story, there is some clutter we need to take care of. The first thing to note is that this story of Jesus' anointing by Mary is one of those few stories that are reported in all four gospels. Considering that what you find in the Gospel of John is 90% unique material, to find common stories is a very big thing. It tells you how important this story is. The only other story that we have encountered in John so far found in all the Gospels is "the Feeding of the 5000". But when you are dealing with a story found in four Gospels you also encounter another problem. When you compare these anointing stories, you find some really confusing differences. For example, the John and Luke accounts have the woman anointing Jesus' feet, but in Mathew and Mark you have Jesus being anointed on his head. In Mathew and Mark, the host is said to be Simon the Leper. In Luke however the host is Simon the Pharisee. In John, you don't have the host named. Mathew, Mark and John say that the location of this event is Bethany. But in Luke, the context indicates that the location seems to be in Galilee. In Mathew and Mark this event is 2 days before the Passover. In Luke we have no idea about the timing of the event. In John the timing of this event is 6 days before the Passover. But the most intriguing difference is about the woman who did the anointing. In Mathew and Mark, the woman is not described at all and only what she did is mentioned. In the Lukan account, the woman who anoints Jesus is described as the

sinful woman who is showing her gratitude. The only place where you have the woman named is in John. Here we know it is Mary. And in our Gospel it does not say that Mary is repenting of anything. Her motivation it can be implied, is her gratitude for what just happened in the previous chapter, the raising of her brother Lazarus from the dead.

So what are we to make of these differences? Scholars have said that maybe there were multiple anointings or at least two distinct ones. But each Gospel tells us only about one anointing because they were each focusing on one theological lesson and they did not want to confuse their readers with similar events with different lessons. Because when Jesus is anointed by the “sin forgiven” woman or the woman who was grateful for the saving of her brother’s life, in both cases, their motivation is gratitude. But the point the Gospel writer wants to make in each case is quite different. In the synoptic Gospels the focus is more on the depth her gratitude, but as you will see in a bit, in John, gratitude was not the focus.

So when people ask you, why all four versions of this story are different, tell them it is because each Gospel has picked up incidences from Jesus life that are relevant to the theological points that that particular Gospel is making. And each Gospel is different because they were originally speaking to a different audience that cared about different things. Mathew was speaking to the religious Jews, Mark was speaking to the Romans who had all the power then, Luke was speaking to Greek truth seekers. John was speaking to all these mindsets put together. But John wanted his Gospel to address the hard God questions and so he chose to tell the stories in a way that answered questions people had Jesus and God at the time. That means, in many cases it is hard to piece together the exact timeline of the events of Jesus life because each Gospel is picking their events and sequencing it to focus on theological truth. Remember, Jesus does not want us to simply have information. He only gives us details that teaches us something. So when you study the Gospels make sure your focus is on the lessons to be learnt that

help your faith journey. Don't focus on trying to piece together details like timelines that the Scripture has chosen to omit. Makes sense?

Ok with that, lets move to understanding the story as told in John and what it means for us.

So in John the way the Jesus story is unfolding in the run up to chapter 12 is that, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, as a next level revelation of his power. This shakes the powers that be in the Sanhedrin and they call for Jesus' death. Jesus then pulls back from his public ministry for a bit. But then goes back to Bethany where Lazarus lived. In Bethany, he was the guest of honor at a party. In fact this party was so special that it goes down in history. How many parties do you know that have such an honor?

Anyway what happens at the party is this. Martha is doing the serving as usual, while Lazarus is eating with Jesus. But what Mary does, is what makes the news. Mary takes out an expensive jar of perfume made of the essence of nard and anoints Jesus' feet. Now spikenard is an extremely expensive perfume that was extracted from the root of a plant that was found only at the foot of the Himalayas in India. By the way, that region of the world is where saffron comes from. It is the world's most expensive spice. 2000 years ago, to have access to something so sought after from a far corner of the world would have made this ointment extremely expensive. Now as soon as she broke the jar and applied the perfume to Jesus feet we are told that the whole house was filled with the smell of that perfume. Now the passage tells us that Judas Iscariot being the one in charge of the money was not happy at all with this lavish expense. He says that that perfume was worth one year's wage. To give you a sense of how much that is in today's terms, one year's wages at the minimum rate of \$7.25 per hour works out to \$15,000. So you are looking at one bottle of perfume worth about \$15,000. Now you might be wondering what Mary would be doing with a perfume that expensive? Experts have suggested that that jar of spikenard would have been the most valuable thing that Mary

had and something like that would have been kept as her dowry. Before modern banking, people needed a compact way to store their wealth. So they might have kept their savings in the form of their possessions. So by Mary pouring out her alabaster jar for Jesus, she was in a sense offering Jesus the equivalent of the widow's mite. It was all she had. She was giving away her dowry money. But whatever she was risking about her future, the point is that she was saying, "only her best for Jesus". Now Judas did not like this move at all. He says instead of wasting that kind of money in one go, it could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Our passage of course points out that Judas did not really care for the poor. He was only upset that because the money spent on Jesus did not go through him, he did not get to steal a portion of it as was his habit. Jesus then rebukes Judas, and tells him to leave her alone. Saying that she did this in preparation for his burial. Jesus tells Judas and everyone standing there that they will always have the poor with them but they will not always have Jesus. These are the main events of the story as told in the Gospel of John.

What is the point John is making here? Well, to start with I want to point out that when Mary went into this dinner, it was her intention to do something extremely special for Jesus. It was her response to what Jesus had done for Lazarus. For her it was a "gratitude gesture". A wordless "thank you". And to do so she offered Jesus the very best of what she had. She also anointed Jesus' feet and not his head. To do this, she had to assume a posture of great humility. In Eastern cultures, the feet were considered unclean. In the middle East culture, it was only servants who would wash the feet of the people of the household. In the Indian culture, to touch someone's feet is to say, it is an honor for me to touch the part of you with the least honor, because your honor is that much. It is a way of showing honor to an elder or a teacher. So Mary's intention was to thank Jesus by giving him her best. And she also wanted to honor Jesus for who he was. At this point she would have believed the things that Jesus revealed about himself, to

the extent that she could understand. She knew that Jesus was someone who had come from God and was so close to God. She had seen Jesus' divine power, even over death.

Also the posture that you find Mary in, in this story is the same posture she has every time she meets Jesus. Mary is mentioned three times in John. The first time, she is sitting at Jesus' feet learning from him. The second time she falls at his feet weeping for Lazarus. The third time she is at his feet anointing it with perfume. So what you find is that of all the people to every surround Jesus, it is this Mary who is more at Jesus' feet than anyone else. She is the one who shows him the most honor. She is the one who applies an anointment on him that was the best in the world. Something fit for a king.

And because of what Mary did for Jesus, this Mary is chosen by Jesus for a very special honor. This is the most special part of the story. You see, as Mary is honoring Jesus, Jesus in turn tells the people gathered there and the whole world, that what Mary is doing is preparing Jesus for his death. Now you know that Jesus' death was the most unique and special death in the history of the world. And who gets the honor of anointing Jesus for this task? It was not John the Baptist, it was not anyone from his family, it was not any of his 12 named disciples. It was Mary, Lazarus' sister. Why? Because it was Mary who always knew intuitively the right way to relate to Jesus. By being at his feet. It was Mary who knew that for Jesus, only the world's best would do, no matter what the cost to herself.

So think about this for a moment. As Mary responds to Jesus and honors him with all her love and gratitude, Jesus in turn gives her the honor of having a very special place in his life and giving her action a meaning that transcends anything she could have imagined. Remember Mary does not set out to prepare Jesus for anything. Hers was a simple act of humility and gratitude. It is Jesus who takes that act of hers and multiples it in significance by connecting it to his own preparation for the cross. Mary means her action in one way. Jesus takes her action and gives it a meaning that transcends

anything she could have imagined. Mary meant to express honor and gratitude. Jesus takes her action and elevates it to make it a part of his preparation for saving the world. And guess what, 6 days later a bit of that ointment would probably still have been on Jesus' feet as they were lifted up on the cross. Contrast this action of Jesus with what he did when the crowd wanted to crown him king after the feeding of the 5000. Well, in that situation, he told them off and disappeared, because he knew what was in their heart. In this case he takes Mary's gesture and elevates it, again, because he knew what was in her heart.

How does this action of Mary and Jesus' reinterpretation of it connect with our lives today? Let me offer you three things because truth seems to come in clusters of three.

Firstly, when we give to God, it has to be our best. That is what it means to give God our first fruits. Whether it is our time, our talent or our finances, we always give God only our very best. This is a principle we see laid out right from the Cain and Abel's sacrifice down to Apostle Paul's admonition in 1 Cor 10:31 which says, "whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God". We do everything for the glory of God because everything we do in life is expected to be simply nothing less than our best for God.

Secondly, we never forget that we always have to be in a posture of humility before God. We can have no pride in the presence of God. Nothing we have is our own, not even our children. Nothing we accomplish is solely by our merit. There is God's invisible hand in everything and so we cannot boast in anything. In our culture it is all too easy to treat God with an over familiarity. And even to take God for granted. Yes Jesus Christ calls us friend but we should never treat Jesus like we treat some other friend. Jesus Christ is our Creator, Savior and Redeemer friend and the only appropriate way to relate to Jesus is by humbling ourselves before the transcendent awesomeness of our Lord.

Thirdly, when we assume the appropriate posture before our Lord and Savior and live our entire lives as an act of gratitude, then God will take our actions and transform it to have a much greater meaning that we can every imagine. Let me illustrate this with another Biblical example so you see a pattern here. Think of King David. It says he was so grateful for what God had done in his life that he wanted to build God a house, so that God could move from His tent. It was completely David's idea and not something that God commanded. In the end even though David did not get to physically build it, he was able to contribute significantly to it. The temple in fact did get built by his son and the temple shaped the worship practices of the Jewish people forever. But if that is too large a scale for us to wrap our minds around, let me give you a smaller example. When you and I bring our tithes and offerings to God's storehouse out of pure gratitude for what He has done for us, God takes that offering and enables the Gospel to be preached. As a result people have had their eternal destiny's changed and heaven itself has broken out in celebration. God can take our simple acts of gratitude and transform it to give it a meaning that is beyond anything we can imagine.

May God shape each of us as a people who know to respond to our savior like Mary does, with our very best and with a grateful and humble heart. And may God take those acts of gratitude and transform them in a way that only He can so that God himself is glorified on a scale that goes beyond anything you or I are able to visualize. Let us pray.