

God Moves... to Empty Ourselves CONF./COMMUNION April 7, 2019

Scripture: John 12: 1-8

¹ Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ² There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³ Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" ⁶ 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. ⁷ Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸ You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."



Since the beginning of the season of Lent, which began on Ash Wednesday, we have been working through a "God moves..." sermon series. Each week we have been

looking at how God first moves within us and then helps us to move out into the world to share our faith with others. Today's message looks at the call that we all have to give of ourselves. Sometimes these acts of giving are acts of giving up – of emptying ourselves of some "thing" to allow God to work in us in a new way. Ultimately, as we draw ever closer to Holy Week and Easter, we come to see that this is the example that Jesus set for us. At the end of the story, Jesus totally surrenders to God's will, fully emptying Himself on the cross for our sake. We remember this sacrificial offering today (whenever) as we celebrate communion. Today we will look at our call to empty ourselves – both as a

means to grow closer to God in our own faith and also as a way to give sacrificially to help others know God. Let us pray...

Our faith story is full of memories. Memory is a powerful thing. Nostalgia is powerful too. This is evident on Facebook and other social media apps. We love to post and look at old pictures on 'Throwback Thursday'. We have pictures of family members, many of whom have passed away, and of our children when they were little on the walls at home. We display our wedding pictures. We also hold sacred memories of many events from our lives near and dear in our hearts. Memory and nostalgia are not just tied to the visual sense but to all of our senses. A few notes or lyrics can trigger us to sing that song or that jingle. A whiff of perfume can bring back memories of a grandmother. The smell of bread baking can evoke pleasant thoughts from our childhood. We pack many good thoughts and emotions into our memories. They bring us joy and comfort and make us feel good inside.

In our passage today, we join the story of Jesus just six days from the Passover. Jesus is heading towards Jerusalem and He stops at the home of some good friends. Yes, there will soon be the triumphal entry – the joy of Palm Sunday. But Jesus also knows that this is the last time He will be passing this way. Jesus decides to make a stop at the house of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. For Jesus, it is a familiar place. They were good friends. We have two other passages that detail interactions between Jesus and this family. The first was when the sisters were struggling over what was best – to work so that all was ready for Jesus' visit and the meal that night or to sit and listen at the feet of the Master. The second was when Jesus came late, but for the purpose of raising Lazarus from

the dead. This is a family and a home that Jesus is very familiar with. This is a place with good memories. This is a place that brings Jesus some comfort as He looks ahead to Jerusalem. A part of Jesus probably stops here for the same reason we take trips down memory lane from time to time. There is comfort and peace and a sense of belonging here for Jesus. The home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus is a place of love and welcome and community.

In our passage today, Jesus is back to familiar table in familiar place. The aroma of food must have filled the air as they reclined at the table together. Jesus and the disciples were gathered there with Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and probably a few other good friends. It was easy and comfortable and warm. Yet for Jesus, in many ways it was like the calm before the storm that would soon erupt in Jerusalem. It would have been nice to just have some pleasant conversation, to relax around the table for a couple of hours, then to find a comfortable place to rest for the night. But it wasn't to be so.

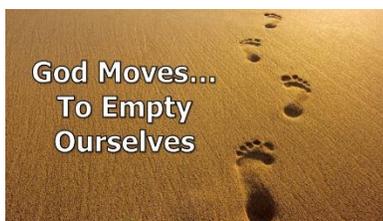
In verse 3 we read, *"Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair"*. It was a beautiful thing that

"Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair".

- John 12:3

Mary did for Jesus. As we learn at the end of the passage, Mary was preparing Jesus for the day of His burial. It is a beautiful act to envision: Mary washing Jesus' feet with some expensive perfume, drying them off with her own hair. It is a very personal and intimate offering. We read that *"the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume"*. I imagine that it was a smell that would forever invoke this scene for all who were gathered there in that house that night. The aroma of Mary's perfume would forever remind them of sacrifice.

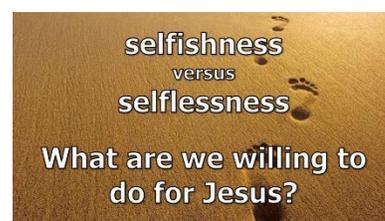
This beautiful scene is interrupted as Judas speaks. Judas objects to the use of such a costly item for this purpose. He protests, saying, "*Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor*"? Three hundred denarii was a lot of money. One denarius was the ordinary day wage for a common laborer or soldier. The perfume that Mary poured on Jesus feet could have been sold and used to buy a lot of food or clothing for the poor. But our scripture also reveals the true motivation behind Judas' objections. He was the treasurer and less money in the common purse meant less that he could help himself to.



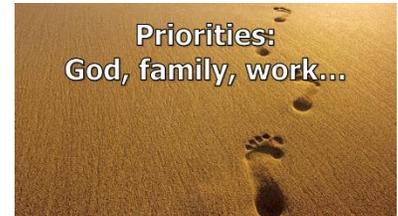
Last week in the parable of the prodigal son we looked at how we can fill all three roles at times on our faith journeys. Sometimes we are like the younger son, eager to do our own will, regardless of the cost or impact that it might have on someone else or even upon ourselves. We fall into sin and "wild living". And like the younger son, we repent and seek to walk righteously once again. He came to the place where he was willing to empty himself of his own selfishness, to turn back towards home, towards his loving father, to be filled again with grace and mercy and love. Sometimes we are like the older brother who is hard of heart and is far outside of his father's love and grace. He cannot extend grace to his brother because he himself does not know and understand grace. We hope that he was able to empty himself of his pride and judgmental attitude so that he could go into the party, so that he could know the father's love and grace. On our good days, we are like the father, loving both sons no matter what they did or did not do. The father is just full of grace and love and forgiveness. He is willing to offer sacrificially for both sons.

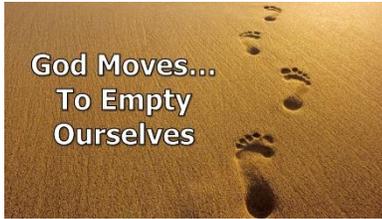
In this week's passage we too can play both roles at times, sometimes being like Mary and sometimes like Judas. And, every once in a while, we can be caught in between the two. At times we can be like Mary, willing to offer our best to or for Jesus. We experience moments when we are willing to give unconditionally of ourselves for another. In a great testament to what love and humility look like when lived out together, Mary anoints and then washes Jesus' feet with her own hair. Again, what a beautiful image this is. And then there is Judas. It is hard to admit, but, yes, sometimes we are like Judas. Sometimes I am like Judas. I can get in the way of what God is trying to do because I want to be in control, because I want to put my will before God's will, because I want to place my interests ahead of God's ways. Have you ever been there? Yes, we all have.

And then sometimes I am this strange mix of Mary and Judas. I can feel God leading me or calling me to do something, and I even know it is the "right" thing to do, but I struggle to do it. It is that place of having the urging to anoint Jesus' feet but struggling with the value of the perfume. It is the prompting to do for the other battling with the idea of withholding something for myself. Inside we are all this mix of selfishness and selflessness. Mary was willing to give the most valuable thing she owned for her Jesus. She was willing to sacrificially offer what she could for her Lord. What are we willing to do for our Jesus?



As we wrestle with this question of what we are willing to do for Jesus, for our faith, for our neighbors, during Lent we are called to look within, to consider our priorities, to think about what really matters in our lives. This is the journey we are called to during Lent as we approach Easter. In the "Fierce Marriage" class last Sunday evening, we looked at what our priorities are concerning our time, resources, and such. The list that we agreed we would like to live by is: God, family, work. In our last two sessions of 9th grade confirmation, we talked about what it meant to live a life of faith and to become a member of a church. What living a life of faith boiled down to for the youth was to commit to the regular practices of the faith: worship, Bible study, small group participation, prayer. Being a member of a church boiled down to our regular participation in the life of the church through the giving of our presence, time, talents, service, and witness. Last Sunday in the baptismal vows that we shared together we committed to these things. These are the basic elements of a life of faith that contribute to our ability to live and love like Jesus calls us to live and love. It is through these practices that we begin to understand what it is to love unconditionally, like the father in the parable of the prodigal son. It is through these practices that we begin to understand what it is to give unconditionally, like Mary did as she anointed and washed Jesus' feet with her hair. I intentionally use the word "begin" because a life of faith is an ongoing journey. We should never stop trying to become more like Jesus.





As we begin to turn towards Easter and towards the rest of the story of Jesus' life, we will see two more great examples of sacrificial giving. Just a few days after Mary washes Jesus' feet, Jesus will humble Himself, emptying Himself of all pride and position and authority, as He kneels to wash the disciples' feet. Perhaps as Jesus kneels at their feet, the aroma of Mary's perfume still lingers on His feet. Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet spoke of the brokenness and death that would come. Her gift was the aroma of sacrifice. It also spoke of the power of a king coming to save His people. This is the second great sacrifice we will be privileged to observe in the coming weeks. Jesus will give His all for us as He gives Himself to save us, His people. Here we find a strange paradox, the odd in-between space, in Jesus' act of giving Himself for us. Here is the paradox: anyone who wants to save his life will lose it, but anyone willing to lose his life will save it. It is sacrifice that leads to victory. It is temporary loss that leads to eternal gain.

Today I close with two questions for you to ponder:

- 1) Do you and I dare to wear the same perfume as our Lord?
- 2) When people are with us, do they catch the scent of sacrifice on us?

Let us pray...

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) Grow. Just as Mary emptied the jar of perfume to prepare for something better to come, what is God calling you to empty yourself of?
- 2) Pray. How do others catch the 'scent of sacrifice' in your life? Pray that God will work in and through you to be a pleasing fragrance to the world.
- 3) Serve. Where might God be leading you to offer sacrificially? What "expensive perfume" might you be able to offer for another?