

OUR FRIEND IN LOVE
Jesus, Our Friend
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We see today in this twelfth chapter of the gospel of John, Jesus walking, on his way to Jerusalem. Last Sunday we saw him leaving Jericho. On the way out of town he meets and is the guest of a man by the name of Zacchaeus, a sinner. He will soon enter Jerusalem. The context of our scripture today is the day immediately preceding that triumphal entry into the city. In these last days of our Lord on earth he was doing a great deal of thinking about giving. Only fitting because he himself was to give his life for us. It's not surprising that he would ask the rich young ruler to sell all that he had. Jesus himself was the rich ruler who had given all. It should not surprise us that after his meeting with Zacchaeus that Zacchaeus was immediately willing to divest himself of everything that he might know the fellowship of Jesus.

Then an extravagant gift given to the Lord is seen here in the twelfth chapter of John. Then shortly thereafter in Matthew and Mark's gospel Jesus is sitting at the place where a person gave their money in the temple, watching people give. He sees a woman who has but two small pennies – all that she has – and she gives them. And the Lord takes note of it. His mind is on giving. He himself is giving.

I suppose that as he nears that crisis himself he becomes all the more aware of persons who are following His example. If you really want to feel the twelfth chapter of the gospel of John then the way to feel it is to draw near in the circle of fellowship with Jesus. This story is unintelligible except we see the Lord as surrounded with persons who love him and in particular some –whose love for him and its expression doesn't know any limits.

To get a perspective of chapter 12 we should read the last verse of John 11.

“Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where he was he should let them know so that they might arrest him. Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany where Lazarus was whom Jesus had raised from the dead. There they made him a supper. Martha served and Lazarus was one of those at table with him. Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment. But Judas Iscariot one of his disciples who was to betray him said, ‘Why is this ointment not sold for three hundred denari and given to the poor?’ This he said not because he cared for the poor but because he was a thief. He had the moneybox and used to take of what was put into it. Jesus said, ‘Let her alone. Let her keep it for the day of my burial. The poor you always have with you but you do not always have me.’”

There are various ways and times that we give gifts. Most commonly we give gifts when someone has a birthday, an anniversary, or it is Christmas. By and large we're probably not marked with giving spontaneous gifts except it be to our wife or husband in which case it might be rare.

Also if we're going to give a rather expensive gift we will probably give some expensive gift that is more useful – like for example a stove or refrigerator or dish washer or televisions or something like that. When it comes to this story in the gospel of John it has the mark of a most unusual gift for it is not given on occasion of someone's birthday or anniversary or some special holiday. Nor is it a useful gift apparently. It is an extremely costly gift. Judas identifies it as

OUR FRIEND IN LOVE

Jesus, Our Friend

being worth three hundred denari. Judas knew with his shrewd eyes what something might be worth. What was a denarius? We are told that in biblical days a denarius is what a person earned – an average laborer earned – for one day’s work. Recall “two hundred denari” is a phrase used for the feeding of the five thousand men plus women and children in the gospels. Phillip on that occasion used the phrase “two hundred denari” to be the amount of money it would have taken to feed that many people – roughly ten to fifteen thousand people. That’s two thirds of the equivalency of the gift that Mary gives to the Lord.

There’s another way that denarius is used in the scriptures. It’s found in the passage in Revelation. In a time of famine seen there, persons will be calling out “a quart of wheat for a denarius and three quarts of barley for a denarius.” An incredible phrase used in a time of intense inflation with food shortage. It’s saying that all a man has to buy at the end of one day’s work, all that he’s able to buy, is a quart of wheat which is food for someone who had a better table and three quarts of barley which would go for someone who would eat a less expensive grain. He wouldn’t have any money left over at all for rent or clothes or any such thing.

So a denarius was one day’s work in wage.

Here is a gift that is equivalent to three hundred days of work. Think of what three hundred days work would cost you. In our culture it would be about sixteen thousand dollars.

It is an extremely extravagant gift. We’re looking at the subject “Jesus, our friend in Love.” Here is Mary the one giving love. Why is she giving it? She senses – you could call it a premonition if you like – that something is approaching for the Lord. In the gospels we see Mary on two occasions prior to this. We see her in Luke 10 as she sits at the feet of the Lord listening to him teach. The story of Martha working and Mary sitting there listening. Jesus breaks the stereotype of his day. Religious teachers in that day wouldn’t take the time to talk to a woman. What could they possibly know? Jesus busts all those stereotypes. Mary is a ready listener and learner sitting at the feet of Jesus. That’s the first time we see her.

The second time we see her in the gospels is in John 11 where she is weeping and the Lord comes to her. Her brother Lazarus is dead. But when Jesus comes what does she do? She throws herself at Jesus’ feet.

It doesn’t surprise me therefore when I come to John 12 and find this woman anointing Jesus that she should choose to anoint his feet. She sat there and listened at his feet. She had been at his feet in grief, now she is at his feet in love. She’s a listener of the Lord. That may indicate that she had some kind of idea of what was up. The Lord had been giving hints on his move with his disciples to Jerusalem, that the Son of man must be delivered up and the sons of man will be given to the chief priests and elders and scribes. He’d been throwing out these hints but no one had caught it. The disciples really hadn’t yet perceived that Mary the good listener was catching the impact. Would it not also be the case that Mary who had a circle of friends in the community as we have seen in John 11 knew that the contract was out on Jesus, that it had been issued by the chief priests and Pharisees. And anyone who knew where Jesus was the scripture says, should let them know of it.

So when they meet that evening, a Friday or Saturday evening before the entry into Jerusalem, there is knowledge within the realm that the possibility exists that if one person in the room gave

OUR FRIEND IN LOVE

Jesus, Our Friend

him away that would be it. Mary knowing intuitively and having listened to the Lord sensed that something was up. With the Lord going to Jerusalem the next day she knew that the pilgrims were going in, it was the beginning of the festive week, it was the first day of the week, the Sabbath would be past. He'd be going into Jerusalem and in as much as there was a contract out on him, would he ever come back? Would he ever make it back? She didn't know that for the next few nights he would be able to come back to Bethany. For all she knew this might be the last time. She was aware of his approaching death, she knew of the contract, so she fell at his feet.

Mary, when she comes to the Lord and gives, she is not on this occasion giving because she has to. There is no rule that says one must do this. She is not giving because she has seen others give. One of the beautiful things about Mary's gift is the spontaneity of it.

The temptation for us of course as we are a Christian is to do things because that's what a good Christian does. A good Christian prays. A good Christian studies the word. A good Christian goes to church. A good Christian gives to the work of the Lord financially. A good Christian involves himself in the work of the Lord. A good Christian is a good neighbor. All of these things.

In looking at Mary she goes above and beyond the call of duty and sets an example of what it's like to relate to the Lord not because we must or we should but because we want to. There's a difference in relating to the Lord because of the thrill of wanting to serve him versus the duty of needing to obey him.

She gives, if we cross reference this same gift with Matthew and Mark's gospel, we find that it was in an alabaster jar. The alabaster jar would be an expensive glass like bottle. It was marked by having a thin neck. It was not like perfume bottles we have today. Use a little bit and put the stopper back. But this was kind of an all at once sort of usage. You broke the thin neck of the bottle and once broken the smell of the perfume and perfume came out. It was most commonly used in association with burial. It was the practice that when a person had died there would be the ointment upon the body. The alabaster jar itself would be left with the body in the grave.

We are told it was pure nard. Meaning that it was evidently from India. Pure nard was imported from India. So here is a very expensive import and she has quite a bit of it as we are to see. She has what is called a pound of pure ointment. A pound at this point of the text is not 16 ounces. It was the custom for example if you were a host in biblical days that when you came in that the guest's head would be anointed with perfume. In fact Jesus expected in Luke 10. Jesus comes into a room, a woman meets him who was a sinner and she cries at his feet, wipes away the tears with her hair and then anoints him with oil.

The Pharisee setting there is shocked by the conduct so the Lord turns and tells his host who was a Pharisee, "When I came in here you didn't even anoint my head." This is twelve ounces of costly perfume would be worth on our market ten to fifteen thousand dollars. It just oozes all over the Lord. No wonder the text says that the fragrance of it filled the house – not just the room. Mary in her giving was giving lavishly and abandonly. She is seen as going beyond the pouring of the ointment on the lord's feet. She let her hair unbind in order that she might wipe his feet with her hair. In biblical days it was wrong and un-kosher for a woman to let down her

OUR FRIEND IN LOVE

Jesus, Our Friend

hair in public. In Number 6 we are told of a kind of a process of which a woman was tried for adultery. One of the initiatory processes was that she should have her hair unbound.

What kind of a person is Mary? She has somewhere in her treasure chest of things a jar of ointment worth this much. If she had been a poor person she'd sold it long ago for income. It almost suggests to me that she was a woman of means. Who had the ability to bring this sort of a thing about? Begin brought up in the circles that she was it would not really be fitting or customary for her to do this kind of thing. It represents an incredible gesture of love and closeness to the Lord.

According to the gospels of Matthew and Mark the feast for the Lord was held in the home of a man by the name Simon the leper. It was not held in Mary's home. That means she had to prepare in advance to give this gift. It was not just something that was spur of the moment.

If you've ever been close to someone and had a premonition does not have long to live how can you show your love? Do you give things? A person has no use of things. You want to draw as close as you can. You want to cradle. You want to show physical love of the deepest dimension. You really can't appreciate Mary's heart unless you get an understanding of what is motivating her to give – the approaching death of the Lord. The only thing she has really that would be fitting to give is something that he can't keep. She wouldn't give him money. He couldn't use it. She would instead give him something that was the deepest expression of her love, which would bring her as close to him as permissible given her culture and her situation with the Lord.

She demonstrates an incredible way. She demonstrates that there are moments when we all have impressions to give to someone we love – send a card, make a phone call, do something out of the extravagance of love. Mary's the kind of person who doesn't let a feeling like that come and go without doing something about it. She acts upon her impulse. So she lives in a wild way, a way that most of us in our culture are very, very uncomfortable with. We almost feel like, "Isn't this improper?"

There's one sitting there who thinks it is improper. Judas. We're told in the other gospels that all the disciples complained. Evidently Judas is the one who stirred up the crowd to complain. Judas was the kind of person who really wasn't concerned with the poor as John's gospel indicates to us. He is concerned that some of this money could be used of himself.

Judas has always been a great question mark with people. Why would the Lord allow someone like that to travel with him. The answer is rather simple: because the Lord loves him. Because the Lord believes in him. Because the Lord saw that this person could play a vital role in his kingdom. So we see that before Judas was called Jesus spent the night in prayer. We see that in the middle of his ministry Jesus is sensing something within Judas so he says to his disciples in John 6 "Did not I choose you twelve and one of you is a devil?" Pretty harsh terms. But the Lord was capable of calling the disciples pretty harsh terms. Once he turned to Peter and said, "Get thee behind me Satan."

The Lord is letting the weeds grow together with the wheat. Judas is a kind of example of a person who follows Christ but who inwardly is slipping away, who is unlike Mary. Mary is thinking, What can I give? And Judas is thinking, What can I get?

OUR FRIEND IN LOVE

Jesus, Our Friend

As you move along in Judas' life you find that small sins lead to big ones. He slips money out of the purse. But it isn't long before he's doing something far more flagrant. You fall into temptation, you fall into sin and you become more evil than you ever dreamed when you began. Judas ends up setting the Lord for thirty pieces of silver. Some estimate that a piece of silver was about four denari. That means that Judas sold the Lord for about 120 denari or about one third of the amount that Mary poured on Jesus' feet.

Inner sin leads to outer sin. Deceptions cannot continue forever. Sooner or later Judas' deception will manifest itself. When Judas' deception manifests itself it's right in the very place of most intense love. Judas cannot take that expression of love. He doesn't understand it. His heart is hardened. Judas is contemptuous of Christ's receiving this expression of love.

The Lord hears the expression of his contempt. Then the Lord himself speaks. His speaking is saved for the later part of the story. One thing that certainly immediately begins to shine is that the Lord knows how to understand the intent of a person who gives a gift. He is able to receive it.

Have you found that sometimes it's much easier to give than to receive? Particularly if you're a person who likes to be independent. Who doesn't want to depend upon anyone? It is extremely difficult for a person of this kind to receive a gift. We've got to learn how to also receive a gift. And do it in a way not to make the person feel bad and say, "You shouldn't have done that!"

The Lord doesn't put Mary down and say, "Mary you shouldn't have done that!" That beautiful expression of her giving would make her feel miserable. She'd just done what she thought as this beautiful thing, the best she could do. Can you imagine the Lord saying, "Mary, you shouldn't have done that." What would she have felt like?

There may be another reason too in the Lord's reception of that gift. The Lord knows what's ahead. He's very clearly announced that in the gospels. He knows the time of his passion is at hand in Jerusalem. The time of his death. Just like us we have people who are close to us, we'd like to share things that are on our heart. One of the real marks of friendship, the deeper the friendship the more you can share. The more you can give the other person to bear. Jesus in his closing months in the gospels had been talking about the thing that was deepest on his heart. He came to give his life, lay down his life. He kept saying it but it kept going over everybody's head. Nobody was catching it. People were so caught up in their concepts of what he could do. But he wanted to have someone to reach out on a human level to listen to him. To be kindred with him in spirit, to understand the deepest of those moments he was passing through.

He finds in Mary the person who will understand. "Let her alone. Let her keep it for the day of my burial." Or "Let her alone in order that she might be able to use it now with a view to my burial." Matthew 26:12 shows that in pouring this ointment on my body she has done it to prepare me for burial.

I know we often take that in a different way. We say Mary really didn't know what she was doing but the Lord explains the significance of her gift after she did it. I wonder in looking at this text if the Lord may be saying something more profound. "Mary does know that something is going to happen to me. She wants to anoint me while I'm alive. She wants to show her love

OUR FRIEND IN LOVE

Jesus, Our Friend

for me. It's the only thing she can do that will have some meaning for her. Therefore let her do it. She's done it in preparation for my burial."

I think then about that coming week that Jesus faced. The aroma of perfume that lingered on him for a few days. I'd like to think that that aroma carried him all the way to the cross. That it was a fragrant memory in the moment in which he was spit at and railed at and accused and crucified that he had a moment of relief for he could think back to a home and a living room that had been filled with love and he could restore his own soul in the human context.

Another beautiful thing. Mary got the aroma on herself. She wiped his feet with her hair. I don't think you wash that kind of perfume out in one shampoo. It must have stayed with her awhile and in those busy days when the Lord was spending the day in Jerusalem and coming back to Bethany at night and Mary would hear the events of the day, the Lord would be separate from her for a season of time that fragrance again and again brought back to her mind the beautiful and wonderful picture of her Lord. In those days they didn't have photographs to look at. She couldn't look at a photo of her Lord but she could remember by the perfume. I know that there's an application of that that when we give something to the Lord, ultimately what we give gets on us.

Have you ever found that as you're worshipping the Lord, giving your heart to him, as you're doing what might be called pure worship – just worshipping and adoring him – what happens to you? Emotional release, peace, a feeling of goodness and mercy. All of these things begin to flow back to us. What happens in worship is as we worship and love him we get more out of it that he ever does. It comes back on us.

I've looked at this story. It's well and good that Mary could give this to the Lord. But the Lord's not here specifically so what can we give to the Lord? How can we express our love? How can our love be like that of Mary?

I suppose it is all simple. Life has a way of breaking down into simple things. The temptation is to see them as trite things. But as I look at it, it seems to me there are only three ways we can love Christ, express our love like Mary of Bethany.

One way we love him is express our personal devotion to him. Another way that we can love the Lord is to express our commitment to his kingdom or to his work or his church. The things that he is the most concerned of. A third way we expressed our love for him is by loving one another. Simple. How do you love the Lord? Personally give him devotion, express your love through commitment to his kingdom which involves all kinds of things, and express your love to one another.

The church needs the company of the Mary, that all of us could learn the extravagance of giving to the Lord. The family needs the extravagance of Mary as well. How often in a family situation life can be kind of a normal thing but there may not be the extravagance of love. As human beings we know by virtue of how close we are to somebody how close we can come physically. Most of us are only at the handshake level. But here we have a picture of a woman who comes so close to the Lord that she feels not the slightest embarrassment that she could anoint his feet and wipe those feet with her hair. A far deeper physical closeness than a handshake could acquire. Maybe that's just the kind of expression of love that from time to time we must express

OUR FRIEND IN LOVE

Jesus, Our Friend

to each other within the family. Within the deepest level of friendship saying, I love you so much that I will be extravagant in this moment in the expression of my love for you to even take your feet, the most tired and blistered and ugliest part of your body and show the extravagance of my love by kissing your feet and anointing your feet with oil, wiping your feet with my hair.

There is that beautiful way to find in our own lives the method by which we may express love for each other.

We think now Lord of your word. The poor you have with you always. But me you have not always. Human life is like that. Social conditions of poverty and disease and the like exist on from one generation to another. Your word tells us we should do the best we can to minister to the poor. It can also tell us through this example that the great riches in life are to be expressed between people. That while the poor is a social condition that's with us always we do only have one life to live and one family and one set of friends which to live it with. Your word is telling us to treasure that relationship. Hold it as something very precious. Treat it tenderly and lovingly. So Lord in these moments we bring to you the need of our own hearts. It may be that while we pray for individual decisions which are forming in our hearts are expressions of love that the Spirit is bringing to us that we need to release and show towards you or towards each other. You don't really care Lord what the world may bring to us materially or professionally or culturally so much as we share what may happen to us within the level of our relationship if we have love that's what we need. Once more Lord Jesus, the story of Mary of Bethany that you said the story of her would be told as a memorial to all the world. Draw us through that story to the very center of your person and let us warm our hearts together in worship to you. Through Jesus we pray. Amen.