

*Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 3Mary 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. 4But 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.) 7Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.*

A few weeks ago I was listening to National Public radio when this story caught my attention: A woman was telling about being trained to bake the communion bread for her church. She was at the home of the regular bread baker – watching and taking notes. Flour, salt, and then a most surprising ingredient – a bottle of Perrier. Into the flour the bread baker poured this sparkling water. So our trainee asked, “Perrier?” and the one who was training her told the story of Mary – of the very expensive perfume Mary used to anoint Jesus feet. Then the trainer said to the trainee, “For Jesus only the very best.” What a wonderful story to hear on public radio. But then the story unraveled as the trainer came clean – I had some Perrier in the house – I used it because effervescent water makes for lighter bread when no yeast is used.

I like the story before the real motive was explained. That someone would go to extra expense just for the love of Jesus makes my heart sing. But often motives are not so very pure.

I would like to think that you are all Marys before me today – so filled with the love of Jesus that you are ready to pour out extravagant gifts for him. Mary used perfume that cost a whole years wages – a pound of this perfume called nard or spikenard depending on the translation – not just enough to get by but a whole pound, far beyond the amount she needed to use to show her love and appreciation to Jesus. John tells us the fragrance of the perfume filled the whole house. But maybe Mary was thinking – Jesus raised my brother Lazarus from the dead – what a little thing this is that I should pour perfume on his feet. Just a short time before Lazarus had been a corpse in a cave – but this day Lazarus was there at table with Jesus no longer stinking with the stench of death.

Yes, I would like to think that you are all Marys, people who have faith in Jesus' victory over death – faith so deep that you live already alive with the life that is eternal. What could possibly discourage us, defeat us, as we are alive in this faith – alive in the life Jesus has won. Joined together in this faith ours is a determination, a power that no enemy can destroy. And the aroma of love and generosity and courage brings the sweetness of spring breezes to all of life around us as we live out of faith in Jesus.

But Judas was there that day also – a critic: “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” Why indeed. In a matter of hours the aroma would be gone. Maybe Judas already knew that before the week was out Jesus would be dead. And no amount of perfume would keep flesh from rotting.

But John tells us Judas said this not because he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief. Judas raised this objection not out of love but out of the desire to serve his own need and greed.

Sometimes I find myself in the Judas role – the critic's role – finding fault with what others are doing. You should be doing it this way, I say, but I lift not even one finger to help. I use criticism to destroy – to serve my need and my greed – with no effort to support and build up. I criticize a program seeking to help the poor knowing that when my critique is complete I will feel justified in not supporting the program. Mary was pouring out her love – Judas would soon be betraying for some coins. No wonder then that Jesus was quick to defend Mary – *“Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”*

I think one of the great temptations in life is to divide the world into Marys and Judases - good people – bad people. Put a label on everyone and make sure the good label is always on me. But when I hear about Mary and Judas I suspect that there is some Mary in each of our hearts – gratitude – a desire to show our love – generosity. And some Judas in each of our hearts as well – faultfinding with whatever others are seeking to do –

using criticism to keep from having to make a commitment – serving our own need and greed. The division is not between the good people and the bad people but between evil and good in your heart and mine.

Luther taught that we were at the same time saint and sinner – in one moment ruled by faith and love and hope – in the very next ruled by fear and envy and greed. Always this battle is going on in us until the day when our dying will be consumed by the sweet aroma of Jesus eternal life. I would like it if true Christians always used Perrier because “for Jesus only the best” but most of the time the truth is that we just need to make the bread a little lighter and weren’t really thinking about Jesus at all. So we talk about our needs to have offices and classrooms and space for conversation and for handicap restrooms and hardly mention Jesus. Many of us may even go through a whole Sunday morning without even a thought of our love for Jesus. Yet in your heart and mine is deep gratitude for our Lord who gave his life for us and who has blessed us in so many ways.

Were we all to pour out our love for Jesus as Mary did the \$850,000 we seek in the capital campaign would be far surpassed. Were we all to pour out our love for Jesus the poor would be continually cared for as well and we would all be blessed. Maybe it is not either or – the poor or Jesus. Certainly my hope is that through the improvements to our church building that more and more will know the love of Jesus and be joined in sharing his every good thing with those in need. But always there is the danger that we let the concerns of Judas rule in our hearts – concerns for our own need and greed.

My invitation to all of you is to look into your own heart as you decide what to share. Is it faith and love for Jesus that is ruling? Or is it fear or uncertainty or even selfishness that rules? Only you and God know what is going on in your heart. You may feel that giving to the capital campaign is not where your love for Jesus would cause you to give but that you need to give to the poor instead. I am sure God would have joy in your giving sacrificially for the poor. But I know Jesus is sad when you and I play the role of critic just so we can stay uninvolved.

I do not know how much we will share on Decision Sunday. Only God knows. But I trust that whatever we give and do in love for our Lord will bring blessings to many.