

Intimacy with God

[John 12:1-8](#)

This morning's gospel reading poses a false dichotomy – should we give money to the poor or give it to God? That's like saying should I love my neighbor or God and the answer is Yes – both! There is actually no distinction between the two but my relationship with God as God and neighbor as human neighbor are quite different.

But this reading raises many other questions which are more perplexing and perhaps more profound. Why did Mary anoint Jesus? Was this a spur of the moment event? or had she planned it? And what did Jesus mean about her anointing him for his burial? We could also ask whether Judas was really a thief and why John's gospel is so much harder on him than the other three.

In John's account, the scene is a dinner party, presumably in the home of Martha and Mary. Their brother Lazarus had recently died, and when Jesus had finally shown up he had called him back from the dead. This was not a resurrection in the same sense as Jesus' resurrection because Lazarus came back to life in his ordinary mortal body and would die again. Indeed, there was a plot to kill him because the people were so excited by this walking demonstration of Jesus' miraculous powers.

So... Martha's in the kitchen, Lazarus is reclining at the table with Jesus and the other guests. And where is Mary? Mary comes in with a pound of pure nard and anoints Jesus' feet, wiping them with her hair. Nard is an essential oil made from the flowers of a member of the valerian family found only in the Himalayas. It was expensive. Expensive enough to cost a year's wages – so for us calculating minimum wage that would be about \$27,000.

Here is Jesus who is known for his simple lifestyle and his love of the poor suddenly being anointed with oil that cost an arm and a leg. Someone has said that it is like inviting Mother Teresa to dinner and opening a \$2000 bottle of wine.

It's not surprising that people were shocked.

But Jesus seems quite unfazed. "Leave her alone." he says "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." In Mark and Matthew's accounts he adds, "Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

The only other time I can remember a statement like this is in the song of Mary the mother of Jesus when she says, "All generations will call me blessed." So this is important. Important enough that this story, with several differences as you would expect, appears in all four gospels.

But if Mary did, as Jesus said, buy the nard for the day of his burial, why is she using it now?

I think I get hung up here by being too literal. Jesus had been in hiding. A few verses before this story opens, following the raising of Lazarus the Council of the Sanhedrin had agreed that Jesus must die because they were afraid that his signs were starting an uprising which the Romans

would suppress, hard. “Jesus therefore no longer walked about openly among the Jews, but went from there to a town called Ephraim in the region near the wilderness; and he remained there with the disciples.” (John 11:54)

It was no secret that his life was in danger. Clearly he wasn't going to be buried that night at dinner, but it would not be long before they would be burying him. He was as good as dead, and so anointing him for his burial was timely.

In John's account, Mary anoints Jesus' feet not his head. Perhaps this is a sign of her recognition that he is the Messiah – *she* is not anointing him as the Messiah, God the Creator has already done that – she is anointing him in preparation for the hardest thing he has ever done – to walk into his own betrayal, mock trial and death. This is the evening before he enters Jerusalem, expecting to be captured or assassinated at any moment. Mary anoints his feet and wipes them with her hair – perhaps foreshadowing the last supper just a few days later when Jesus himself will wash and dry his disciples' feet.

Clearly, Mary loves Jesus. Her action is not one which expects something in return -this is a generous and extravagant gift given in love and surprising intimacy. And Jesus is pleased.

Often we think that if we do the right things and follow our spiritual path then things will go well for us. We expect that if we do our bit, God will do his. But Mary has no thought of what Jesus might do for her in response to her demonstration of love. She does not anoint him in order to get something from him. Her relationship with Jesus is one of deep love and honesty, of relational courage.

As we walk through the Stations of the Cross I am struck by the images of women supporting and comforting Jesus in his time of great tribulation. Mary of Bethany is not one of the women we see on our walls but she is quietly yet passionately present to him every step of the way. I know that many of the women in this room have supported their menfolk in times of great difficulty, and yes the men too -you have supported your women.

This icon – of a woman laying Jesus' body in the grave – has come to be one of the most precious for me. How much more intimate can we be with anyone than when laying them out, or as Mary, anointing their body for burial?

Perhaps that is why Mary is to be remembered – for the intimacy of our relationship with Jesus.

I want to suggest to you this morning that this level of intimacy is possible and available to us in our relationship with God: She or he has a special name for each one of us, a name she whispers in our ears and which warms our hearts. And he longs for us to respond with an extravagant and intimate love, with the song of our souls. God longs for us to anoint him with the praise and the love of our hearts.

When Mary anointed Jesus “the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.” Our prayers are like incense to God – a sweet fragrance, a gift and a blessing.

I imagine that the prayers which are sweetest to God are the prayers which are not asking for anything except to know the divine more deeply. As I have said before, God is not a vending machine where we put in the correct number of prayers, press the right button and get the goodie we want out the bottom. That is transactional but with God, all things are relational.

When Mary went into the room with her oil, and her hair let down, she already had a deep relationship with Jesus, probably built over years of friendship. Her extravagant anointing came after many hours and days spent with him. We will not know the depth and the sweetness of an intimate relationship with God unless we too spend time with him.

There is no either/or in the Great Commandment – it is to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. One of the great gifts of the Rule of St. Benedict is that of balance. As we come closer to Holy Week let us ask ourselves how balanced we are – are we serving our neighbor and loving God? Is our busy-ness balanced by the depth of the time we share with God?

Is this the time to become more like Mary, more relational, more intimate and perhaps even more extravagant in our love for God?