John 12:1-8 — Foot Care
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Through Lent we've been hearing stories of Jesus on the road, ministering all over Galilee and Judea. Now Jesus' ministry in motion is coming to an end, with his destination in sight, Jerusalem. Today's lesson comes from the Gospel of John, chapter 12. Listen with me for God's word to us.

> 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.
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> [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.
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> [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.)
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> [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."

Sara Harwell died in Nashville 27 February, of complications from longterm Parkinson's Disease. Since I never knew her, her death might not have affected me. But it turns out Sara and I share some friends who have poured out loving tributes to Sara's life and work.[1] Now I wish I had known her.

She served as an archival librarian at Vanderbilt University and the Tennessee State Library, and most recently as chief archivist for the Disciples of Christ denomination. Sara spent her life as a dedicated church historian — not a splashy career choice. But good lord, did her work matter. Her colleagues at the Disciples Historical Society wrote in memory, "Sara believed history is more than a record of the past — it has a moral calling for us."[2]

Sara herself wrote in 2014,

> [G]ood history should always be a moral undertaking. Our moral response to people and events in the past normally takes the form of remembering, admiring, or condemning those people and events. This approach often involves the study of historically marginalized groups: racial minorities, women, the dispossessed. Our response revolves around issues of right and wrong, fairness and injustice…. Coping with and resolving these challenges [in the present] is much harder if we have not mastered the discipline of questioning our roots and if we are wedded to assumptions about the obvious rightness of where we presently stand.[3]

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[1] Dark, David. Blog post: "A Moral Calling." 2 April 2025. https://daviddark.substack.com/p/a-moral-calling
[2] "In Memoriam: Sara Harwell." 5 March 2025. https://discipleshistory.org/in-memoriam-sara-harwell/
[3] Ibid. In that same post they reprinted Sara's 2014 article "A Familiar Past: Does History Need a Moral Response?"

So let's put on our moral historian hats as we consider today's gospel story, not assuming our current ideas are always right. This story and its characters are vivid. But this text and its cultural context are from long ago and far away. To understand what moral call this story might have on us, we should feel free to ask questions.

Like, why this version of the story?

The other three gospels *also* tell of a woman pouring perfumed oil on Jesus during a dinner, but with varying locations and participants and details. None of the other gospels gives the woman a name. In Luke she's identified only as "a woman from the city, a sinner" (7:37).

As John tells the story, the woman with perfume is well-known to Jesus, and to us readers. She's Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus, all beloved friends of Jesus. We meet them in the previous chapter when Lazarus gets gravely ill, Mary and Martha beg Jesus for help, and finally he arrives after Lazarus has been dead for four days. Jesus weeps, then calls Lazarus out of the tomb and back into life.

That history matters because that public act of power made Jesus even more polarizing: many Judeans who witnessed Lazarus raised have come to believe in Jesus, while others rat him out to the chief priests and Pharisees. Those religious authorities who've become lethally opposed to Jesus now also want to kill Lazarus.

So this loving dinner scene in Bethany, celebrating Lazarus's return from the dead, is bracketed in John's gospel by direct bodily threats to both Jesus and Lazarus. For everyone at that dinner table, the stakes couldn't be higher.

Why anoint Jesus' feet?

In Mark's and Matthew's similar story, a woman anoints Jesus' head, symbolizing in scripture someone taking up kingship, or being consecrated for a holy purpose. While soon Jesus will be labeled as "The King of the Jews," his elevation will be brutal and degrading.

Here in John's narrative, Jesus is anointed not on his head but his feet.[4] Jesus and his friends have walked many miles in streets with open sewers. A well-off dinner host might have a servant wash guests' feet. Or a devoted disciple might wash their teacher's feet as an act of veneration. But it would not be typical to put expensive perfume on anyone's feet. Mary offers Jesus an astonishing level of foot care as he rests from his journeying.

Also,

> In Israelite society the feet were the body zone symbolizing *action*; thus, the story points to a ritual of forthcoming transformative action. Jesus is about to do something of singular significance.[5]

Jesus is anointed for this active mission not by a high priest but by a woman, Mary.

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[4] Culpepper, R. Alan. *The Gospel and Letters of John*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998. p. 193.
[5] Malina, Bruce J. and Richard L. Rohrbaugh. *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998. p. 205.

Why Mary?

The biblical Marys are amazing. You could glean a lot about the Christian good news just by studying all the Marys in the gospels, among them Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene who is the first to preach Christ's resurrection, and Mary of Bethany, whom we're talking about today.

This Mary is up to something both symbolic and lavish, using "an extraordinary amount" of "very expensive perfume" to anoint Jesus' feet. It comes from the spikenard plant, a type of honeysuckle that grows at high elevations in the Himalayas. When the text tells us that Mary's fragrant oil would cost a year's wages in Palestine, it's plausible.

Mary's action shows us love poured out, not counting the cost, flowing fragrantly onto Jesus' feet and filling the house with aroma, foreshadowing Jesus' burial. Because she sees how Jesus' time is short. She's probably worried for him, sensing his vulnerability. Mary gets it. She's the disciple who recognizes and affirms the import of what Jesus is about to undertake.

In fact, Mary lovingly cares for Jesus like he will care for other disciples. Just days later Jesus shares a last supper with the twelve. On that evening *he* pours water into a basin and washes all their feet. John uses the same Greek verb when Mary *wipes* Jesus' feet with her hair, and Jesus *wipes* the disciples' feet dry with a towel. In the long speeches that follow, Jesus repeatedly points to love as the whole point: "I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. As the Father loved me, I too have loved you. Remain in my love."

All through John Jesus talks about his closeness with God. What if Mary, though, has shown Jesus such tangible, encouraging love that he wants his other beloved friends to experience something similarly powerful? In fact, Jesus commands his disciples to wash each other's feet, to show love for each other, just as he has done for them, and as Mary has done for him. John's Gospel explicitly makes this clear.

Lutheran scholar Karoline Lewis says it beautifully:

> Mary's extravagant love for Jesus makes it possible for Jesus to show extravagant love in what follows — washing the feet of his disciples, handing himself over to be arrested in the garden, carrying his own cross, dying, rising, and ascending. Mary loves Jesus into his future as the fulfillment of "for God so loved the world."[6]

The gospel writer invites us to admire and respect Mary in her role as a model disciple of Jesus. She can teach us so much about love and faithfulness.

Why does this story matter now?

Judas speaks for all who resist extravagant love as wasteful. And he suggests that Mary should return to a conventional piety of charitable giving. Jesus will have none of that male judgment of Mary. He defends Mary's discipleship bluntly: "Leave her alone."[7]

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[6] Lewis, Karoline. "Loved into Future." Working Preacher, 1 April 2019. https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/loved-into-future

[7] Hat tip to Sandra M. Schneiders. *Written that You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth* Gospel. New York: Crossroad, 2003. p. 109-110.

Judas at least gives lip service to diverting assets from the privileged to fund the needs of the poor. Some of our government leaders, on the other hand, decry as "waste, fraud, and abuse" nearly anything that supports economic justice. So Kentucky's Medicaid funding, which provides health care for low-income mothers and newborns, is being targeted.

We the church know different: we who celebrate Mary's abundant way of anointing, and the way Jesus loves others with his whole self. When Jesus says, "You always have the poor with you" he's not justifying poverty. He's reminding us, going back to at least Deuteronomy, that God always calls the faithful to be doing right toward those who don't yet have enough.

Are you and I always using our voices and our votes and our valuables to do right toward vulnerable bodies and souls? Mary pours out love to nourish Jesus, calling *us* to pour out love nourishing anyone for whom the stakes are high.

My spouse Aimee is preaching this morning at Westminster Presbyterian in Portland, OR, where our dear friend Lindsey is being installed as associate pastor. Lindsey happens to be married to another woman, and they are parents to a wonderful little boy whom Aimee got to baptize a few years ago.

Aimee's preaching on this same John text, and her sermon is titled "History Healing." As we rediscover the intuitive and lavish leadership of Mary of Bethany, we're more likely to repent of the Christian church's long history of denying and excluding women's gifts for leadership. And by celebrating and installing an openly LGBTQ pastor, that Westminster congregation not only welcomes a superbly gifted minister. They're joyfully affirming, both now and retroactively, thousands of faithful Jesus followers who had to hide their sexuality or who never pursued ordination because the way was blocked. The church back then was confident about what kind of people it expected as ministers.

But Mary expands our definitions of "disciple." And in his mission of pouring new life into the world, Jesus also broke all kinds of social and religious expectations. Not the rabbi people expected. Not the king they recognized. Not the messiah they had looked for. His startling way of love can help us stitch up some of the moral wounds of the past. And he can love us into the future.

Karoline Lewis points us there, saying:

> I think Jesus took Mary's love with him into Jerusalem. I think he acted out her love when he washed the feet of his disciples, especially when he washed the feet of Judas about to betray him and Peter who would deny him. I think he felt once again Mary's love, her gentle touch, when he was beaten. I think he held on to Mary's love, desperately, when he hung on that cross…. [T[hen, I think Jesus took all of that love into the tomb, all of that love that would then love him into his future as the resurrection and the life.[8]

In the name of the Giver,
the Gift,
and the Gratitude.

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[8] Lewis. Ibid.