

John 12:1-11 – Poured on Jesus’ Feet

The last two weeks we looked at the story of Lazarus. Jesus both shows his power to raise the dead, and his reason for doing so in his grieving the effects of sin and loving us. Pastor Rich mentioned that Jesus’ resurrecting Lazarus evokes a response from those who see. These responses are answers to Jesus’ main question to us in the story of Lazarus, “do you believe this?” He asks this to Martha, but he asks it of all of us too.

In our passage for this morning, we see Mary’s anointing of Jesus. Here, she lavishly pours out a year’s worth of wages on Jesus’ feet, dramatically filling the room with the fragrance of the perfume. A truly beautiful act of adoration of her Lord. A rare moment of sincere worship that is remembered in all the gospels. But it is a polarizing act, as Jesus’ disciples themselves are scandalized by it. For one of them, it begins the process of supreme betrayal.

Let’s hear God’s word, John 12:1-11:

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ²Here a dinner was given in Jesus’ honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. ³Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus’ feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

⁴But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, ⁵“Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages.”

⁶He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

⁷“Leave her alone,” Jesus replied. “It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. ⁸You will always have the poor among you, ⁹but you will not always have me.”

⁹Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, ¹¹for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and believing in him.

This is the Word of the Lord

Slide 8

How many of you have seen some of the Cathedrals in Europe? Personally, I have seen a couple of the best, even if I was too young to truly appreciate them. Along with being in the Vatican, I have seen the Cathedral in Cologne, and the one in Milan. Both of them are astounding to see—even for a distracted eighteen-year-old. The intricacy of their design, the thought and purpose behind every door, fresco, relief, is something to marvel at.

Slide 9

The Cathedral is meant to give you a sense of the awe and grandeur of God; to show the beauty of God's creation through the means of human ingenuity. The cathedral was designed to tower over the rest of the city. For most people living during their construction, they would be, by far, the largest building imaginable. Their architects were always looking for new ways to go higher. These grand heights would not only be there to change the city skyline, but once inside, they would cause your eye to lift up to heaven, again reminding you physically of the purpose of being there. There would be no mistake to the visitor, no matter who they are, what their place before the almighty would be, humble devotion.

Slide 10

Today, they do not stand in the skyline of the city in the same way, but they do maintain a distinct beauty comparison to what is around them. Much modern architecture is ugly. Sometimes this ugliness is on purpose. Many of the buildings on the UBC campus were built in the 'brutalist' era of architecture, where large blocks of concrete were stacked on top of each other, making classrooms and offices look like a military bunker. The result is, well, what it intended, functional ugliness. The architects do not believe in real beauty, and so they create a functional ugliness.

Slide 11

In distinction, a Cathedral seeks to find the beautiful symmetry that is inherent in God's creation. God himself is beautiful. Psalm 24:7 says, "One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple." As God is perfectly beautiful in himself, so is his creation. God calls his creation 'good', and the goodness of his creation has a lot to do with its beauty. If we are to honour God's beauty well, we should seek his beauty and reflect that beauty in what we create, especially his churches.

When we hear 'beauty' today, we are likely to simply think of something 'pretty' or decorative. But real beauty is so much more than simple decoration and can't be limited to what is merely pleasant. Beauty is a fact of this creation because this creation comes from God. There is something transcendent about the particularities of this world. God's word

tells us that he is “not only holy, powerful, immense, and righteous, but also good and desirable, a gift graciously shared...”¹

Slide 12

Exodus 28:2 says, that the furnishings in the Temple and the garments worn by the priests are “for glory and for beauty.” How we might further define that beauty comes from Phil.4:8, “...whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy...” It is common in our age to subjectivize beauty, say that it is only in the eye of the beholder, but this is false. Sure, we are all trained by our culture to see certain kinds of things as appealing, but, as God is truly beautiful, true beauty exists. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but it is much more than that. This passage asks us, what do we behold as beautiful?

Of course, not every church is able to do this, nor should they. It takes a kind of mass cultural effort to make these things happen. Anyone who knows the first thing about the Reformation knows about the shady fundraising that took place in funding the building of the Vatican. This might lead us to ask, whether the creation of these buildings is Christian at all. Might the money and effort be better spent on the poor? How many mouths could have been fed instead of some Cathedral being built?

Slide 13

There might be good reason to ask that, but when we do, we should be aware of the resemblance of to the same question of Judas Iscariot in our passage for this morning. When looking at our lives, our spiritual life included, what is practical to the world must not be our primary consideration. One commentator says this, “If self-righteous piety sometimes snuffs out genuine compassion, it must also be admitted, with shame, that social activism, even that which meets real needs, sometimes masks a spirit that knows nothing of worship and adoration.”² That does not mean we should not be prudent with what God gives us, but our judgement of prudence must be on God’s scale, and not the world’s. If we think what Mary did in this story is wasteful, that should cause us to check our hearts. Again, this passage asks us, what do we behold as beautiful?

I’m not trying to excuse what some people did in funding the construction of these cathedrals, but to say that their construction is like a multigenerational pouring of perfume onto the feet of our Lord. Their construction is a testament of what can be done by humans as image-bearers of God. When we have our minds cast heavenward, when we emulate the

¹ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*, 17.

² D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, 429.

beauty of God's creation—looking for wonderful symmetry and balance, technique and intricacy—we gain the ability to create truly beautiful things.

Slide 14

Mary's anointing of Jesus should give us pause to see what beautiful acts God is calling us to. What can we participate in to give God greater glory? How can we avoid the line of reasoning that Judas and the Jewish leaders condemning Jesus have? What sorts of idolatrous practicality do we harbour in our own minds? Let's weed these out as we dig into this story together.

Slide 15

The story as John tells it begins with Jesus and Lazarus as they are reclining to eat together. Meals in this time would be an intimate thing, where friends and relatives would recline on the ground for a lengthy time reminiscing over a meal. In our story we find Jesus with his resuscitated friend Lazarus eating together before they head down to Jerusalem for the Passover. The dinner was in Jesus' honour, a little thank you for bringing him back from the dead.

Slide 16

At this dinner, Mary takes a 'pint of pure nard' and pours it on Jesus' feet, and wipes it with her hair, as you do, when you're trying to say thanks for bringing my brother back from the dead. Flowers just don't cut it. The perfume Mary was offering was most likely some kind of perfume made of the essential oil of Himalayan spikenard. John tells us its value is around a year's wages for an average labourer. Mary and Lazarus must have had some means to even had such a thing.

This perfume that Mary uses is translated here as 'pure'. But we should not miss the double meaning the word 'pure' here has for John. In Greek, the word for 'pure' has the same root as the word for what is translated 'faith'. So, in this sense, we could call it a 'faithful' perfume. The 'faithfulness' of the perfume brings to mind what kind of sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Slide 17

What makes this offering 'pure,' or 'faithful'? First, because it is precious to the giver. Malachi 1:14 says that our sacrifices should be faithful to what we have, "cursed is the cheat who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord." True thankfulness gives our best, not just what is left over.

Slide 18

Second, the faithfulness of the perfume is not only in the perfume itself, but in the offering as well. As Paul says in 2Cor.9:7, “Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” The woman’s heart was in the right place, the gift is not under compulsion, but offered extravagantly.

Slide 19

This image of Mary pouring this extravagantly expensive perfume on Jesus’ feet and then wiping it with her hair is a very moving image. A woman’s hair in this culture was considered her ‘glory’ (1Cor.11:15). For her to wipe Jesus’ feet with it would be seen as an act of total devotion. Her humble surrender to Jesus is as pure as the perfume that she poured on his feet. And while we cannot smell that pleasing aroma, we can appreciate her act and her devotion. It is truly beautiful, an act done in thanksgiving and worship, even if it’s significance of preparing for Jesus’ death was beyond her comprehension.

Slide 20

However, not everyone appreciated this beauty. Judas scoffs at her devotion, and wonders why she wasn’t more prudent with her gift. John points out that he didn’t really care about the poor, but simply wanted more money in the bank for him to help himself to.

Even if theft was his motivation, his question is still reasonable. To pour out \$70,000 worth of perfume on Jesus is an odd thing to do, even if you meant well. Maybe give Jesus the perfume, and let him decide what to do with it instead? That might be more reasonable, but it wouldn’t be so beautiful. It wouldn’t give as clear a picture of what God desires for our hearts when we see him for who he is. It wouldn’t have the same kind of eternal significance. It would make more worldly ‘sense’ but often the beauty we encounter in God’s world doesn’t have the kind of sense that we desire. His ways are not our ways, but his ways are beautiful. Again, this passage asks us, what do we behold as beautiful?

It is often the case that a poor work of art is called ‘didactic’, that is, its main purpose isn’t making something beautiful, but teaching some kind of lesson. Now, that isn’t to say that a great work of art can’t teach; the most beautiful things in the world do teach, but they do so in a way that is somewhat intangible. The beautiful can never be fully described. God’s glory can be seen and tasted, but our understanding of it is always limited. Beautiful works of art, or parts of God’s creation, point beyond themselves to something greater and more that is hidden from us. Great art is evocative. It evokes a sense of something unutterable. It pulls our hearts.

What our hearts are pulled by is telling. What does the story evoke for you? Notice the different reactions of Mary and Judas. Mary, in gratitude for Jesus saving her brother, pours out possibly the most expensive thing she owned. Offering it and humbly wiping his feet

with her hair. But Judas does not have this gratitude, he thinks only of what he can get from Jesus.

I think that Judas could not appreciate Mary's act of beauty because his heart was not pulled to Christ. He did not see the beauty because his god was not Jesus in front of him, but the money in his pocket. That is where his heart was being pulled. He might have been able to understand a lavish gift when reasonably given and reasonably used, but this gift was an outpouring of love that made no worldly reasonable sense. The heart open to what Mary is doing, and appreciates it for what it is, will want to go and do likewise.

This is why Jesus rebukes Judas like he does. Jesus knows the deeper significance of the anointing, and why the Holy Spirit led her to offer this perfume as she did. The anointing is there to prepare for Jesus' burial, a foreshadowing of what was to come. It is common in those days to mask the smell of a dead body by pouring perfume, as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were said to have done when Jesus died. But here we see an act that anticipates that, maybe even preparing Jesus himself for what was coming.

Slide 21

In rebuking Judas, Jesus says, "You will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me." This has sometimes been taken inappropriately by Christians as an excuse to not serve the poor, as there will not be anything we can do to solve the problem. Or, sometimes this verse in history has often been used to justify lavish wealth in Christians, but that is an improper understanding of what Jesus means by "the poor you will always have with you."

It seems that there is a double meaning in Jesus' saying this. On the one hand it is a statement of fact, we cannot create a society free of poverty in this age, and attempting to do so should not come at the expense of serving Jesus. On the other hand, it also seems to be a statement of what a healthy church should look like, always having the poor with them.

Slide 22&23

Ethicist Stanley Hauerwas says this, "Jesus' observation that we will always have the poor with us seems a counsel to justify ways of life that assume there is nothing we can do to eliminate poverty. Yet Christianity is a faith of the poor. This woman poured precious ointment on a poor person. The poor we will always have with us is Jesus. It is to the poor that all extravagance is to be given. The wealth of the church is the wealth of the poor. The

beauty of a cathedral is a beauty that does not exclude but in fact draws and includes the poor.”³

Notice how Hauerwas uses the Cathedral as an example of beauty that is in service to the whole church, rich and poor alike. Jesus says, “whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” Jesus himself was a poor man, as Hauerwas points out, and he calls all who are poor to him. Not only those who are materially poor, but most importantly, those who are poor in spirit, who do not look to their wealth to save them, but to Christ alone. And this is why God gives us this image of this woman offering in such a way in every gospel account. That we can come to Christ like she does, offering a pure sacrifice.

I’m going to give you a challenge in light of what we have learned about the act of Mary pouring out the perfume, a challenge to do something beautiful in your life for our Lord. Now, this does not mean necessarily to paint a beautiful picture, though it might mean that, or to perform a beautiful piece of music, though it might mean that too. I mean that, God has given you a gift, and he is calling you to offer it to him. This is the acceptable response to what he has done for you. Not only has he raised your brother from the dead, but he has raised you to new life too.

Slide 24

Doing something beautiful like Mary doesn’t mean that you need to have something like hers to give. Consider again the Cathedral. While the architect might have had a grand design in his mind, to make this come to reality to hundreds of years of hard manual labour. The Cathedral in Cologne began construction in 1248 and wasn’t complete until 1880! These carpenters, stonemasons, and blacksmiths would be skilled workers, who likely would never see the completion of their job. And yet each piece needed to be expertly cut and fixed to make what we see and marvel at today.

For us too then, we might not see the final end of what we give God, and that’s not the concern. The concern is the purity of the gift, whether it is the best we can offer, whether it comes out of our heart, a spirit of humble devotion like hers. This will be different for each of us, depending on what God has given us first. And none of us should judge the other person’s gift as being lesser, or imprudent, but to focus on what they can give to God out of gratitude for their salvation, out of love for him and his beauty.

Somewhat ironically when thinking of this passage, the beautiful thing that we might want to do for Jesus might be to serve the poor. This is ironic, as it is Judas that uses this excuse

³ Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, 215.

to condemn the woman, but that is because his heart is in the wrong place. Notice that the woman anoints Jesus' feet. Jesus tells us that whatever we do for the least of these we do for him. As the church, if we are to imitate this woman, then we should serve one another, serve those God calls us to, even if that is in ways that look absurd to those around us whose hearts are not drawn to Christ.

One way that I think we today can do something extravagant for Jesus, to pour perfume on his feet, is to start being very intentional about hospitality in the church, especially to those who we wouldn't normally give that to. Yesterday, I was at a classis meeting where we were seeking to find new ways to be hospitable to those with same-sex attraction and gender dysphoria.

Throughout Christian history, we, through the power of the Spirit, have been ingenious at finding new ways of helping people in Christ's name. Whether this is through the creation of hospitals, education, or reasonable government, Christians have been there. Today we have a unique opportunity to minister to people who struggle around us. How the church might care for these people is to treat them how we all want to be treated, as saved sinners, members of God's family. Welcomed in as all of us wish to be. Not having our sin excused by having it explained away but washed in the blood of the lamb.

Truly, even before we think of how we might minister to people with same-sex attraction, or gender dysphoria, we should think about how we minister to the single people around us. Singleness is on the rise in our society (having grown 10% in the last 25 years), and the church must be a uniquely gracious place for single people. Christians in the past have prized singleness as a beneficial state for the Christian, but today the experience of most single people in the church is to be treated as second-class. How many couples here try to maintain community with the single, the divorced, or the widows? I too struggle with hospitality, it doesn't come naturally to me, but it is essential.

I ask you, how can we build a beautiful community in this church? What cathedral can we, as Christ's church build for the people around us? What kind of beautiful display of grace can we offer? I trust that the Spirit will work through us as we seek this together. He loves those people more than we ever will, and desires for them to proclaim his gospel as they receive forgiveness and transformed hearts.

Mary showed an extravagant act of hospitality to Jesus, even if she didn't know what she was doing. Having eyes to behold this beauty is essential if we want to participate in creating beautiful things for those around us today. So, as you go, think, what has God given me to offer? How can I show appropriate gratitude for his saving me, for his raising me from the dead? I am excited to see what beautiful things God will do through this church.

Let's Pray.