



# First United Church of Oak Park

## Prodigal Mary

John 12:1-9

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I often struggle with reading a story in the bible without some context about where it fits in relation to other stories or events. Additionally, there is so much traveling back and forth in Jesus' ministry, that I get turned around about where he is and where all these places are in relation to one another.

In chapter 11 of the Gospel of John, the chapter preceding our scripture reading today, Jesus learned of Lazarus being ill, waited for him to be dead for 4 days before traveling to Bethany to resurrect him. Does that timeline of death and resurrection sound familiar to you all?

It appears he then left Bethany, made a quick trip to Jerusalem about 5 miles East, and then continued up to Ephraim, which is about 15 miles north, near the wilderness. The Jewish leaders, back in Jerusalem, were left to wonder if Jesus would show up for the Passover because they had plans for him. Jesus knew what those plans were and that returning to Jerusalem for the Passover meant his death. He had been preparing his disciples for this, even if they hadn't realized or understood it. But before going to Jerusalem, to celebrate the Passover and walk to his death, Jesus chooses to return to Bethany, to stay with Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. This is where our scripture begins, at the start of chapter 12.

Listen now for the word of God...

**12** Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup>There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup>"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" <sup>6</sup>(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.) <sup>7</sup>Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup>You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

This is the word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.**

Will you pray with me? Teacher God, awaken us, to a new understanding of your word. Awaken us, to the stirring of the Spirit in this place, within us, and between us, allowing us to be moved. Amen.

This story takes place no more than a week after Jesus was in Bethany and Lazarus was dead. Lazarus now sits at the table, freshly risen from the grave, and the stench of death still lingering in the air. Jesus had left so quickly after resurrecting Lazarus that this family, whom Jesus loves, did not get a chance to properly thank him. Therefore, I can only imagine their extreme joy at welcoming Jesus into their home again and they celebrate with a feast.

This story focuses on two of Jesus' disciples: stingy Judas and prodigal Mary. Stingy, prudent Judas...I don't know about you, but these are adjectives that describe me in many ways. When it comes to money, I can be stingy; I want to be sure I'm spending my money on items that are useful and good investments and donating to causes that use the funds wisely and make positive impacts. I'm wary to give money to someone on the street for fear that I will be enabling an addiction. I'm prudent in my spending and my actions because I'm concerned about how people think about me, how it might affect my future, or my loved ones: after all, I have to pay my mortgage, association dues, credit card bills, I need to pay off debt, and plan for a possible future family. Overall, my life has been one big calculated, strategized move after another: always in school, always working, all in the hope that I might feel secure, successful, and live a sustainable life. In our society, a stingy, prudent, cautious person is sensible and wise.

But what about Prodigal Mary? She's being wasteful isn't she? To pour out an entire bottle of such expensive perfume, all at once, that costs a year's salary – that's a reckless use of financial resources.

I was gifted an expensive bottle of perfume for Christmas several years ago, so many years ago that I can't even remember when exactly and I use it so sparingly that I still have it and I didn't even spend the money on it! I did the same thing with a special bottle of olive oil I got when I was in the holy land, I used it so infrequently that it ended up going bad before I could finish it. What a waste!

To Judas, the cost of that perfume was too great to pour out all at once, on one person, even if it was for Jesus. And what about the way she did it? How silly and foolish she must have looked in the middle of a celebration, interrupting the festivities to anoint Jesus' feet; not his head, his feet! And she used her hair to do it!

Prodigal, wasteful, foolish – Judas probably wasn't the only one thinking these things about Mary. But these are words we've heard recently. Just last week in fact, when we heard the story of the prodigal son. He too was wasteful and foolish and yet his father welcomed him home with open arms, threw a lavish party, and deemed him worthy of love.

This act by Mary is an act of lavish, extravagant love. In a home that was just recently filled with utter grief and the stench of death, it is now filled with joy and the powerful aroma of love, a permeating force strong enough to wipe out the grief and the odor of death. This is an act of one who knows what is to come, who can only respond and prepare with the kind of love and generosity that Jesus preached and taught.

Prodigal Mary. Unlike the other disciples, she heard and understood Jesus' teachings, she recognized and heeded the signs that his death was imminent. This perfume, made of pure nard, had been purchased in anticipation of his death, to prepare Jesus for his burial. Our prodigal Mary gave the most extravagant gift she could, to express gratitude because she knew the most extravagant sacrificial gift was soon to come.

In this case, given the choice between stingy and wise versus prodigal and extravagant. I choose the latter. I want to be more like Mary, a disciple who is unconcerned with how others might view my actions, a disciple unashamed of my faith, who is generous, willing to be vulnerable and express love extravagantly. Because extravagant love is never wasted.

I wonder if any of you are familiar with the song "Love is Something" by Malvina Reynolds. It may be better known to some of you as "Magic Penny." And the lyrics go like this...

Love is something if you give it away,  
Give it away, give it away.  
Love is something if you give it away,  
You end up having more.  
It's just like a magic penny,  
Hold it tight and you won't have any.  
Lend it, spend it, and you'll have so many  
They'll roll all over the floor.

Love is something that's impossible to waste because when you give it away you end up having more.

Valuing wisdom is not a bad thing, but when that wisdom means being stingy with love, the sacrifice is too great. God came in the life and ministry of Jesus to show us a life of extravagance, a life of abundance. Not an abundance of material things or wealth in the form of money in the bank, but of extravagant gifts of love, forgiveness, and grace, of abundant gifts of compassion, kindness, and hope.

We struggle to accept such gifts because we cannot comprehend them, and we struggle to share such gifts because our values contradict them. We fear how others will perceive us; we fear there isn't enough to go around because these are expensive, costly items that we need to spread sparingly or . . . or what?

The bottles of love, grace, forgiveness, kindness, compassion, and hope, will they run dry? I suspect the opposite. By pouring out all we have, the entire bottle, we will fill the entire house with the fragrance. These gifts will reach all who are witness to them, seep into their souls, and be a pleasant aroma wherever they go, bringing fragrance to our world. These costly gifts were given to us freely, unconditionally and are meant to be shared in the same manner. Because extravagant love is never wasted, we will end up having more.

How can you be like Mary? How can you give love extravagantly? How can you be a prodigal disciple?  
Amen.