

Today's gospel is about a dinner party. Maybe the strangest dinner party in history. For one thing, Lazarus was there. A few days earlier, he was dead, then Jesus raised him back to life. The dinner party was probably to thank Jesus for that miracle. But that's only part of the story. At some point, Mary did something so outlandish that it shocked Jesus' disciples. They couldn't believe what they were seeing. Everything about it bothered them.

But Mary understood something Jesus' disciples didn't. She saw clearly what was about to happen when Jesus entered Jerusalem. She knew Jesus was going to die. So she prepared a gift that shocked the disciples. But Jesus loved it. The story begins this way.

“Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany where Lazarus was, the one Jesus had raised from the dead. So they gave a dinner for him there; Martha was serving them, and Lazarus was one of those reclining at the table with him.”

It was Saturday night in Bethany, a small town outside Jerusalem. In a few hours Jesus would enter Jerusalem on a donkey. Over the next few days, he would cleanse the temple, curse the fig tree, teach in the temple courtyard, and face the growing hatred of the religious leaders. This was the last happy evening he would know. The next day he would begin his final journey to the cross.

Mary and Judas are two of the central characters in our story. Mary never said a word, and Judas said too much. One revealed her heart by what she did, the other by what he said.

“Then Mary took a pound of fragrant oil—pure and expensive nard—anoointed Jesus' feet, and wiped his feet with her hair. So the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil.”

Nard was expensive. A pound of nard cost 300 denarii, about ten months salary at the time. Was that too much? Was her gift extravagant? How much is too much? Judas objected to this “wasteful” extravagance. Why not use the money to feed the he said. So why did Mary do it?

She wasn't there for the meal.

She wasn't there for the fellowship.

She wasn't there to ask questions.

She wasn't there to listen.

She was there to give her best to Jesus.

She wanted to honor Jesus so much that she ignored the customs of the day. A woman wouldn't normally sit at a man's feet, much less let her hair down in public, and certainly not wipe his feet with it. When Judas objected to what he perceived as Mary wasting expensive perfume, Jesus responded, "*Leave her alone; she has kept it for the day of my burial.*"

Mary must have sensed the increasing hatred and opposition to Jesus among the Pharisees and other religious leaders. A teacher who hung out with tax collectors and prostitutes couldn't last very long. So Mary concluded that her beloved Jesus wasn't long for this world. She wanted him to have the best she had to give while he was still alive.

Mary's gift to Jesus was so extravagant and so radical that his disciples couldn't understand it. If our faith never causes us to do something that make no sense to others, maybe we're playing it too safe. In the world's eyes, Mary was foolish to do what she did. Will the world ever say that about us?

Jesus welcomed Mary's extravagance. "*Leave her alone; she has kept it for the day of my burial. For you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.*" Jesus wasn't saying we shouldn't care about the poor. He was reminding Judas and the rest of his disciples about a passage in Deuteronomy, "*There will never cease to be poor people in the land; that is why I am commanding you, you must willingly open your hand to your afflicted and poor brother in your land.*" It's as if Jesus were saying, "Drop the phony compassion. The law commands you to be kind to the poor. You're always supposed to care for them. Nothing is stopping you from taking your own money and giving it to them. So stop judging Mary for showing her devotion." Radical love is better than phony compassion.

Here's the difference between Mary and Judas. Mary loved Jesus. Judas loved money. We can't love Jesus and love money at the same time. We have to choose. Mary made her choice. Jesus made his. What choice have you made?

Do you love Jesus? Good, then don't be afraid to let the world know it and don't worry if others don't understand. Don't let anyone tell you to back off your love or tone down your joy. Don't let anyone talk you into playing it safe.

How much is too much love for Jesus? There's no such thing. *Amen*