

`MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Fifth Sunday in Lent, April 10, 2011

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)
Hymns: 399, 19:1, 405, 403, 50.
Lessons: Psalm 145, 1 Corinthians 12:1-11, John 12:1-8
Sermon Text: Mark 14:3-11.
Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Here is one of those situations where a believer in Jesus Christ was criticized for doing something for Jesus. Mary's actions were done out of love for her Savior, and Judas, the traitor, led the other disciples in their indignation at Mary's act of love.

With this brief introduction, let's look at

MARY'S ACT OF LOVE TOWARD JESUS

- 1. In giving him an expensive gift, she prepared his body for burial.**
- 2. Judas' greed and hypocrisy lead to criticism of her deed.**
- 3. But the memory of her act of love lives on wherever the Gospel is preached.**

Among the Jews at the time of Jesus, preparing the body for burial was the common, respectable thing to do. Aromatic herbs and spices, including what are called today "essential oils" were used for this purpose. From rabbinical commentaries on the Old Testament, we learn that Jewish customs spoke of washing dead bodies and anointing them with perfumes. This was not a true embalming in the Egyptian sense, or in the way that bodies in America are embalmed. Instead it was a kind of tribute and has been compared to pouring scented oil on someone's head at a banquet. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea brought myrrh and aloe for the burial of Christ. The New International Version identifies the large amount as 75 pounds. Whether these spices and aromatics were to be wrapped in with the linen burial cloths or arranged in the tomb beside the body is of no significance. They were used to honor the dead and to help mask, to some degree, the stench of death.

Nard was one of the most common of these perfumes, although it was very expensive, coming from India. It was nard that Mary used to anoint Christ – an action of which he said "*She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial.*" Nard, called spikenard in the King James Version, was among the finest of imported perfumes.

This happened in Bethany, in honor of Christ, at the home of a man called Simon the leper. He had obviously been healed of his leprosy. Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead, was also present. His sister Martha served at this meal. His other sister Mary is also present. You have met Mary and Martha previously. That was the time Martha was serving Jesus and we read in Luke 10:40-42 "*But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to [Jesus] and asked, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!'*" "*Martha, Martha,' the Lord answered, 'you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.'*"

At this time, however Mary does not wish only to receive from Jesus. She wants to give and to show him some love and honor. Mary honored Christ in a very special way. The perfume she used, imported from India, was very expensive, worth a year's wages. She anoints her Lord and master, using this very costly ointment.

Nard, spikenard, was very precious, very costly. Matthew and Mark stated that Jesus' head was anointed, John states that she anointed Jesus' feet. So she obviously anointed both his head and his feet. Mary then dried his feet with her hair. By anointing his head, she was honoring him in the manner we read about in Psalm 23:5: ***"thou anointest my head with oil."*** By anointing his feet and then wiping them with her hair, she was humbling herself in much the same way Jesus would humble himself by washing his disciples' feet. Some people who were present, including Jesus' disciples, were indignant. It was a very humbling deed that Mary performed. It was not considered proper among the Jews for a woman to loosen her hair in the presence of men as Mary did. In those days, a respectable woman would not have let her hair down in public, but Mary was willing to unbind her hair and perform the service of a slave for Jesus. When she was finished, as she arose and moved about the house, the perfume in her hair spread the fragrance throughout the house. She gave the best she had for her Lord.

Mary's act was inspired by love for Jesus. Jesus speaks of this act as in anticipation of his death. John tells us ***"It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial."*** John 12:7 Matthew states Jesus said ***"When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial."*** Matthew 26:12. Jesus anticipated his death and speaks in this way of this good work. The best of our good works are those we do without realizing how good they are. Maybe Mary began to understand the significance of what she had done when she overheard Jesus explaining it to the disciples.

Jesus defended and commended Mary. He said that there is a time and place for everything, also a time to help the poor, but since he would not be with them very long, this was the time for Mary to confess her faith openly and honor him. He called her action a beautiful thing. He could see into her heart. The followers of Jesus would all have plenty of opportunity to help the poor – us, too – since there will always be poor people. But this opportunity to honor Jesus was fleeting. Jesus would not always be among them in the flesh.

None of these disciples were present at Jesus' burial. There would only be two members of the Sanhedrin who had come out into the open, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, and a few women. No wonder Jesus said that her deed of faith and love would be remembered wherever the gospel would be preached in all the world.

Jesus says she did it to prepare him for burial. As the omniscient Son of God, Jesus could know there would not be enough time to anoint his body before sunset on Friday, the day he would die. The Roman soldiers certainly would not be concerned about giving a proper Jewish burial to a man who had been condemned to die the death of a criminal.

Now the disciples were displeased as they saw this action. In their opinion she had wasted something that might have been devoted to a better purpose. John tells us that it was Judas who had caused this indignation. His heart was even now alienated from his master. He asks ***"Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages."*** He sits in judgment and passes this harsh verdict upon Jesus and Mary. John gives us the real reason Judas complained about this. ***"He 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."*** John 12:6

The whole container of this precious perfume was emptied on Jesus' head and feet. Judas complains 'sure, this was a nice, symbolic gesture, but was it necessary in view of all the good the money from it could've done for the poor?' Judas was a hypocrite. His comment was certainly logical and made sense. But the worst thing is that he didn't care at all about the poor. He wanted the money for the perfume handed over to him as keeper of

the moneybag so he could steal at least some of it. He was upset by Mary's act because it made them poorer, and of course, it made him poorer. So it is with hypocrites. They put up a front that looks good, but their hearts are all wrong. They don't mean what they say. Still, Jesus, who knew of Judas' greater hypocrisy that would lead to Judas betraying him, allowed him to carry on his deception.

Judas had left everything and followed Jesus. But if Jesus' future should end suddenly, what would happen to Judas? Scripture says he was a thief. This suggests he had been stealing for some time. And others of the disciples may have agreed with him about Mary's extravagant gift to Jesus.

Matthew and Mark tell us immediately after this lesson that Judas contacted the high priests and agreed to trade Jesus for 30 pieces of silver.

Matthew confesses his own guilt when he says it was Jesus' disciples who objected to what Mary had done. John singles out Judas Iscariot. Matthew admits that they were all thinking what Judas was saying out loud, or at least they agreed with Judas after they heard him say it. Their indignation reminds us of the fact that it was customary to give alms to the poor in connection with the celebration of Passover. At the very least, the disciples were guilty of bad manners. Jesus must have been embarrassed. He defended Mary, saying, she has done a beautiful thing to me, both a pleasing thing and something ethically worthy of praise.

Jesus defends Mary against the criticism of Judas, and tells us that this deed of hers will be told throughout the world, wherever the gospel is preached. ***"I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."*** These words also anticipate Jesus' command to his disciples to preach the gospel to all the world, as at the end of Mark's Gospel: ***"Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation."*** Mark 16:15.

Notice that Jesus could already look forward to the gospel being preached throughout the world. It must've sounded preposterous that Mary's humble act of kindness would become part of the worldwide proclamation of the church. Yet we are talking about it today, 2000 years and half a world away from where it occurred. And yet there are many Christian people who do not recognize the names of the Roman Caesars, but they know that Mary anointed Jesus for burial shortly before he was crucified.

Christians are still criticized for doing things for Jesus. Whether something is done directly for the support of the preaching of the Gospel, as through gifts in the offering plate, or spending time doing things for God's house and facilities, or even spending time praying for the spread of the Gospel and for fellow Christians – and there are other things Christians can do and DO – it is for Christ. We think of the words of Jesus' on judgment day when he welcomes those who have faith in him into their heavenly mansions: ***"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'"*** Matthew 25:34-40

While we cannot physically pour precious ointment on Jesus' head as Mary did, we can do many things for Jesus. May God bless all such things as we do for Christ! Amen.