

Hair Dryer
3/13/2016
John 12:1-8

In most families there are certain stories that get told over and over again. In my family there is the story of my brother and I staying up until the wee hours of the morning on Christmas Eve to put together a Playmobil pirate ship for our 4 year old nephew.

Playmobil Pirate Ship

As the hours dragged on and we had many little pieces and even smaller stickers to apply to those little pieces – we decided we wouldn't follow the box instructions. My sister wailed, "No you can't do that – he'll look at the box and know you didn't do it correctly". Needless to say we took the time needed to do things like the box and he was thrilled the next morning.

Or the time that

These stories get told over and over again at family gatherings and become classics.

The story in today's Gospel lesson is a classic also. It was one of those stories that was told over and over again. We know this because it is in all four Gospels and that is a rare thing. It is told a little differently, but the story is basically the same. A certain woman pours a pound of costly perfume on Jesus' feet after washing them with her tears and drying them with her hair.

In the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) the woman is not named, and it is implied that she might be a woman of ill repute who was grateful for Jesus' acceptance and compassion toward her.

In John's Gospel that we have today, the woman is well known to us. She is Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. It is only a short time after Jesus had raised her brother, Lazarus, from the dead, and Mary can't thank him enough or honor him enough. We remember Mary, the emotional one whose sobbing caused Jesus himself to weep over Lazarus. Mary was the one who sat at Jesus' feet and listened. Mary was the sensitive one who wanted to do something special for Jesus.

An Act of Service and Love

Mary's actions certainly brought an uncomfortable note to the gathering. In the first place, Mary went against proper behavior in that culture by making herself the center of attention in the presence of men. Second, she touched a man in public. Third, she dried his feet with her hair. Women never let their hair down in public, and if they did, it usually meant they were dishonorable women. Then, of course, there was the extravagant gift of perfume. It cost 300 denarii. 1 denarii was the average day's wage. So this gift was the equivalent of about 300 days of work. This pound of nard was probably supposed to be used to bury all of her family, but Mary shares it solely with Jesus.

But even though other people may have been uncomfortable, Mary has a knack for doing the right thing at the right time. Mary is the only one who seems to catch the significance of Jesus' words that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer and die. It is Mary who recognizes what is to happen and is preparing Jesus' body for burial. Jesus confirms this by telling others to leave her alone because "she bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial."

It is also quite possible that by anointing Jesus' feet, Mary is foreshadowing the day before Jesus' death when he will wash the feet of the disciples. This humble act of service and love is exactly what Jesus will soon do to his followers on Maundy Thursday.

Money Given to the Poor

Unfortunately, there is a spoilsport in most stories, and there is in this story too. Judas jumps in and criticizes Mary for her extravagant act of love by saying, "Why was this perfume not sold for 300 denarii and the money given to the poor?" Yeah, right! As if Judas was really all that concerned for the poor. He just wanted more money in the disciples' purse so he could steal more out of it.

But let's not dismiss Judas as a simple thief – a person we could never be like. Think about the times when we hear messages of "good will" we realize they are from individuals whose motives are self-serving and deceitful. We identify these actions as having "hidden agendas," as coming from "wolves in sheep's clothing."

Jesus also responds to Judas' statement that the poor could have benefited from the sale of the ointment. He remarks that there are always poor people to be helped, but the undertone of that comment is, "Yes, this perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor, but would it have? If you had an extra 300 denarii in your hands right now, would you give it to the poor? Is that really where it would end up?"

Note that John, the narrator, impugns Judas' character and motives, describing him as a 'thief,' but Jesus does not; he challenges only Judas' assumption that the perfume — and Mary's act — was wasted. Jesus defends Mary's act of kindness.

But what about Judas and his actions? As we read the passage, a little self-reflection will reveal to us that some of the same sinfulness that corrupts Judas is with us every day. To be sure we are capable of doing acts of kindness; however, our intentions may reveal that the "truth is still not in us" and in the end our good actions are compromised. That's when the Holy Spirit drives us to the cross, where the ultimate act of love and kindness is revealed through Christ's death and resurrection.

Loving Others As We Are Loved

You and I don't have the opportunity to wash Jesus' feet with our tears and dry them with our hair or anoint him with costly perfume today. But what we do have is the opportunity to do what Jesus told us when he said, "Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me." So, we love the Lord extravagantly when we love other people extravagantly.

The love Mary shows in wiping Jesus' feet with her hair reminds me of a program called Locks of Love. Through this program individuals are able to donate their hair to children who endure a medical hair loss. This act of kindness and compassion by donors to physically share a part of themselves with children in recovery is an extension of Christ's love towards others. Their act of kindness can be a prophetic moment that transforms another person's life.

Jesus said that those who are forgiven much, love much. When we recognize how much we have been forgiven, that love flows over the top of us and spills out onto other people around us. But it would appear that the

opposite is true also. If we find ourselves not loving others very extravagantly, could it mean that we don't really think we have been forgiven all that much? Maybe we look at our lives and see that we haven't made any glaring errors lately and view ourselves as at least above average. Maybe we think it is like when we were back in school and the teacher graded on the curve. We didn't have to be perfect, but if we were better than average we were alright. But the Lord doesn't grade on the curve. He grades on the cross, and we all have to throw ourselves at the foot of the cross and look for pure grace.

The season of Lent is a time for reflection and spiritual stock taking. It is a season that invites us to strip away all of the extraneous things in our lives and make sure we are doing that which has eternal significance. Mary is a good example of that. She sat at Jesus' feet and listened instead of scurrying around the kitchen like Martha. She wept on Jesus' feet and dried them with her hair and anointed him for the most important death in history. She made her days count and did what was lasting.

What Christ Did For Us...

May we, like Mary, live our lives in such gratitude for what Jesus has done for us that we treat others with the same extravagant love that will inspire others to come to him as we have done. Amen.

In her anointing of Jesus, Mary discerns and marks the extraordinary character of this moment in Jesus' life: he is now moving toward his own sacrificial death.

John 12:1-8 Common English Bible

Six days before Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, home of Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Lazarus and his sisters hosted a dinner for him. Martha served and Lazarus was among those who joined him at the table. Then Mary took an extraordinary amount, almost three-quarters of a pound,

of very expensive perfume made of pure nard. She anointed Jesus' feet with it, then wiped his feet dry with her hair. The house was filled with the aroma of the perfume. Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), complained, "This perfume was worth a year's wages! Why wasn't it sold and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief. He carried the money bag and would take what was in it.)

Then Jesus said, "Leave her alone. This perfume was to be used in preparation for my burial, and this is how she has used it. You will always have the poor among you, but you won't always have me."

May God add a blessing to the reading, hearing, and understanding of this Word.