

### Mary's Extravagant Waste

So how are everybody's finances? Are you worried about money? It's hard not to. The stock market has crashed. Our retirement savings are in the tank. Not that I plan on retiring anytime soon. I feel lucky to have a job. Every morning I wake up, and listen to the news as I'm getting ready, and hear about how many people have been laid off, or simply sent home. How many people are applying for unemployment. Have you heard the comparisons, between what is happening to our economy right now, and the Great Depression of the 1930s? It's scary. Some say we're headed straight for another one. Meanwhile, Marlin Bartel tells me that this year's wheat crop has been endangered by our recent weather, with its freezing temperatures. Great depression indeed.

One thing's for sure. Now is not the time to waste, or to live extravagantly. Now is the time to save, to scrimp, to live frugally. Now is not the time to go out and to buy an entire pound of perfume made of pure nard. And then to pour it on somebody's feet. I don't care whose feet they are.

I looked up "nard" in my Bible dictionary. Here's what it says: "Nard. An ointment extracted from the *Nardostachys jatamansi* plant found in the Himalayas of India. [You couldn't make that up!] The distance required to import the ointment to Palestine added to its value. The roots and stems of the plant are used to produce an aromatic oil that serves as a cosmetic, a perfume, and a stimulant. This expensive ointment was often stored in alabaster boxes and opened only on special occasions." Let's see, today's a special occasion. It's a pandemic! What should I buy? Some food for my family? Or some "costly perfume made of pure nard?"

The clock is ticking; did you notice? It's now six days before the Passover, according to John. According to the same Bible dictionary, "Passover" was "a ritual observance of Israel that celebrates Yahweh's deliverance of the community from Egypt." Now that's a special occasion! Arguably the most important day of the Jewish year. And in Jesus' day, if at all possible everybody went up to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. Surely Jesus won't go. Not this year. Not after what just happened. Not after he raised Lazarus from the dead, causing an uproar, angering the Jewish leaders. Did you hear they are plotting to kill him? It's true!

The clock is ticking. It's six days before the Passover, and Jesus has come to Lazarus' house. It's in Bethany, just a few miles east of Jerusalem. Is he thinking about what he is doing?

It so happens that Lazarus' house is also the house of Martha and Mary, his sisters. Not only are these three among Jesus' closest disciples, they are among his closest friends. Their house has become something of a safe haven for Jesus. A place he can "let down his hair," so to speak. His three dear friends are hosting a dinner for him. And John wants to make sure we know that Lazarus is one of those at the table with Jesus. The one whom he had raised from the dead, John adds, in case we have forgotten. ☺

No wonder they were giving a dinner for Jesus! Lazarus had been dead in that tomb for, what, four days. And Jesus had simply cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" And he did, still bound in his burial cloths. John wants to make sure we know that Lazarus' body stank. The reader and we hope and assume that Lazarus has taken a bath and put on fresh clothes before sitting down at Jesus' dinner party. I also want to know what Martha prepared and served. Don't you? What would you serve Jesus if he had just brought your beloved brother back from

the dead? I would serve standing rib roast. That's what my mom used to serve on Christmas day when I was growing up. She always reminded us how expensive and extravagant it was. "Just for Christmas day," she would say. If only we weren't in the midst of a pandemic! If only we weren't on the verge of another Great Depression.

The clock is ticking. Mary comes in, carrying her alabaster box full with "a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard" (John is like my mom; he wants to make sure we know how expensive it is.) Now Jesus and the other guests at the table were probably reclining rather than sitting. That is how the guests would arrange themselves at special meals during Jesus' time. So Mary goes to Jesus' feet (which are right there, beside him). And she kneels. And opens her alabaster box. And she pours it—all of it—onto Jesus' feet. Mary, hold on! What are you doing? Is that nard? That had to cost 300 denarii! (Which according to my Bible [dictionary] is equivalent to one year's wages! Would you blow a whole year's salary on somebody's feet? I don't care who it is!)

And we have to ask, why Jesus' feet? Why not his head? I mean, if you're going to anoint an honored guest, the proper way to do so was to pour just a bit of perfume—on their head. Not a whole pound of perfume! Was that John's way of suggesting that Jesus' feet were particularly smelly that evening? Kind of like the stench of Mary's beloved brother Lazarus' formerly dead body? Talk about replacing one stench with another (in this case stinky to sickly sweet)!

Or did Mary have a premonition of how Jesus was going to wash all of their feet in just six days' time? Did she know that that was the clock that was ticking?

Even so, you don't waste that amount of perfume! Think of how many poor people that could have fed! (Or better yet, since we all know now that Judas doesn't care about the poor, think of how many days that could feed us! Enough to get us through these this dratted pandemic!

And what did Jesus say to Judas? "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." Jesus is not saying we shouldn't care about the poor. He's saying we should care about the Son of God, when he happens to be in our very midst.

People of First Mennonite Church, the Son of God is in our midst. And the clock is ticking. Forget about the pandemic. Forget about your financial worries, at least for the next seven days. Now is the time to honor the body of Christ. Let's have a dinner—how about standing rib roast? Let's bring our most expensive perfume. And let's waste it!

In case you hadn't noticed, this story comes in the Gospel of John not after the triumphal entry, as our service order implied today, but right before. As if Mary was anointing the feet not just of her friend, but of her king.

Let's read together the Confession printed in your bulletin and projected on the screen.