

SERMON
March 25, 2007
5 Lent C
“Mary’s generosity”

At our Soup Supper on Tuesday night
we talked about the gospel passage,
and the question came up
whether or not Judas was being misrepresented in this story.
Did it really say that Judas used to steal from the common purse,
or was that inserted later to blame everything on Judas?

I don’t think it can be proven one way or the other.
All we have is the story as we’ve received it.
But the point of the story obviously
is to contrast the actions of Judas and Mary.

And it’s a glaring contrast.
On one side of the room, Mary is quietly rubbing Jesus’ feet
with an extravagantly expensive ointment,
and on the other side, Judas is complaining about the cost of this ointment.

Mary is performing an act of love and devotion.
It’s very intimate, what she’s doing.
She’s kneeling down at Jesus’ feet,
gently rubbing them with a fragrant oil.

She leans her head way down to his feet and uses her hair for a towel
until her hair is shiny and sweet with the odor.
The whole house is filled with the fragrance of the perfume.
It’s almost embarrassing.

In fact, maybe that’s what’s bothering Judas.

He can't stand that much intimacy.

He's uncomfortable with that kind of closeness so he starts talking,
loudly, about the one thing he knows about: money.

"Do you know how much money this perfume costs?" he says.

"That's way too much money for this kind of thing.

Why wasn't it sold and the money given to the poor?"

I suppose he has a point, in a way.

I mean, if you just look at the numbers,

it probably would be smarter to use the money to help the poor
than to use it for such a luxurious thing.

But it really seems like Judas is trying to hide behind the poor,

pretending to care about them

but not having enough human warmth
to appreciate a simple act of love.

The quiet generosity of Mary

is contrasted with the loud stinginess of Judas.

The gentleness of Mary

is contrasted with the hardness of Judas.

I suppose there is such a thing as tough love,

but I think it always has to come from a tender place.

You're not really helping the poor

unless you're doing it out of compassion.

The checkbook somehow has to be connected to the heart.

Mary shows us a generous heart –

a heart of compassion that has responded to the compassion of Jesus.

She has felt such love coming from him
that she has responded with a loving gesture.

When we were talking about this passage on Tuesday night,
someone said it reminded them of giving our visitors a jar of jam.
A jar of jam may not be as extravagant a gift
as the ointment Mary gave to Jesus, but the idea is the same.
I guess you could call it a “random act of generosity.”

Generosity comes out of a full heart.

Recently I was reading about a diplomat who travels a lot
and often visits countries of other religions.
He said he’s learned
not to bring up the topic of Christianity as a religion
because he can see people start to tense up right away.

But he’s found that if he brings up Jesus as a person,
he gets a different reaction.
There’s a respect and a welcome.
People naturally seem to respond like Mary.

Maybe if we would approach Jesus in that manner –
with care, respect, and love –
then we would find it easier to talk about our faith.
Mary gives us a model of faith.

I think this Gospel story has something to tell us about worship.
As I remember it, there are four types of spoken prayer –
adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication – ACTS.

And this story is about adoration.

Mary is showing Jesus adoration when she anoints his feet.

She's basking in the presence of Jesus.

There ought to be some of that in worship.

Personally, I find it in communion.

When we sing the *Sanctus*, I feel that presence.

The story says that

when Mary anointed Jesus' feet with the perfumed oil,

“The whole house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.”

It filled your senses.

It's the same thing when we bring out the shiny silver,

and the starched white linen,

and the beautiful hangings and vestments,

and the expensive flowers.

[We offer beautiful music.]

These things fill up our senses,

like the perfume filled the house that day in Bethany.

What we learn in worship is how to give extravagantly –

and how to receive extravagantly.

In worship we put ourselves in Mary's place

so that we might have her heart of generosity.

So it seems to me that the generosity of our worship

leads directly into the generosity of our giving to others.

A generous heart is an overflowing heart.

I hope in our worship we'll be able to come to know the generous love of Jesus

and become more generous people.