

WPC
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The Fragrance of Love
Matt. 26: 6-13; Mark 14: 3-9; John 12: 1-8

This morning, we conclude our sermon series on the Gospel of John by looking at the 12th chapter. The incident we're going to look at is also recorded in Matthew's and Mark's Gospels. Since it's a brief passage, we're going to look at this account as it appears in all three texts. This will give us a chance to see how John makes slight alterations and corrections to the other gospel accounts.

Now some people are bothered at the possibility that the gospel writers might correct one another on certain details. But I don't believe this diminishes the authority of Scripture. In fact, I believe it strengthens the authority of Scripture, because it shows us that these documents are based in reality and are not simply pieces of propaganda. As any lawyer knows, when there are multiple witnesses to an event, they report seeing it differently.

Ordinarily, John does not repeat what Matthew, Mark, and Luke have written. So for instance he does not include the Parable of the Prodigal Son or Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus. There are a few instances, however,

when John does repeat an account that is recorded in the other gospels, such as the feeding of the 5000 and the anointing at Bethany. Cay has already read for us Matthew's account. Before I read Mark's account, let me alert you to the fact that both Matthew and Mark place this event during the middle of Holy Week, within two days of Passover and after Jesus has already entered Jerusalem.

Now let's read Mark's narration of this event in Mark 14:3ff - you'll notice that it's going to be slightly different [READ TEXT]:

First, notice that in v. 3 Mark identifies the costly ointment as nard - nard is an imported fragrance which is very expensive. By the way, alabaster is also very expensive. Matthew simply said that the ointment was very costly, but Mark gives us the actual amount of what this nard is worth – more than 300 denarii. A denarius was the usual day's wage for a laborer. By today's standards, at just \$5 per hour, 300 denarii is equivalent to \$12,000. That's a lot of money for any age. And she even broke the alabaster flask! No wonder the people were a little indignant.

Second, in v. 7 Mark includes Jesus' statement, "For you always have the poor with you," but then he adds, "and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish." In Mark, Jesus makes it clear that this act is not simply

a substitute for helping the poor. We can and should also show kindness to the poor.

Finally, both Matthew and Mark end this story the same way: "wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her" - we're doing exactly that today.

Now let's look at the 12th chapter of John. John will correct the other gospel writers at certain points, and he will also give us some additional details about this event [READ TEXT].

John in v. 1 says this event occurs six days before the Passover - John places this event on the Saturday before Palm Sunday, not during Holy Week. He corrects Matthew and Mark on this point. John's placing of the incident makes the best narrative sense, for he has it occur as Jesus passes through Bethany on the way to Jerusalem (Woman's Bible Commentary).

Next, in v. 3 John names the woman who anoints Jesus. Now we know that the woman was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. Many commentators are curious as to why John records Mary anointing his feet, which would have been highly unusual, while Matthew and Mark record that she anointed his head. Some interpreters believe the anointing of the head had to do with anointing Jesus as a king. It may be that if Jesus' feet were originally anointed, over time it later got told that his head was anointed

instead to signify his kingship. Other interpreters believe that Mary anointed both Jesus' head and feet. After all, John says Mary anointed his feet, but he doesn't say that she didn't also anoint his head.

John's account of who complains about this event is also different from Matthew and Mark. The other gospels say it was all of the disciples who raise objections; in v. 4 John points out that it was Judas Iscariot who objects to Mary's act, and furthermore, in v. 6, John lets his readers know that Judas was a thief). Judas is the one who tells how much the nard is worth. Judas tries to establish a situation of either/or love: either you love Jesus or you love the poor. Jesus refutes Judas by affirming the kind of both/and love Mary has shown: one can love both Jesus and the poor (Women's Bible Commentary).

That's our text for today. Before making some reflections on these passages, I'd like to take some time to share one speculation that some interpreters hold concerning Judas Iscariot as a result of this account. It's not integral to our understanding of the text, and you certainly don't have to buy it, but it is an interesting hypothesis.

Many have wondered about Judas, because he's the one disciple we know is from Judea. Most or all of the other disciples are from the northern region of Galilee, but Judas is called Iscariot because he comes from the

Judean region of Kerioth. In C. 6, John gives us a clue to the possible identity of Judas when he calls him "Judas son of Simon Iscariot." Notice that Matthew and Mark tell us that Jesus' anointing at Bethany occurred at the home of Simon the leper. That means that Simon must be the father of Mary, Martha, Lazarus. . . *and possibly Judas*. Some interpreters have speculated that Judas may be the brother of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha.

One argument in favor of this hypothesis is that, according to John, Judas is the one who knows how much the nard is worth. These ordinary fishermen from Galilee, they don't know nard from Old Spice. Only a wealthy person would know that the nard was worth 300 denarii. Perhaps Judas is so angry because he sees the family fortune going down the drain, so he scolds his sister Mary and says, "Why this waste? This nard was worth \$12,000!" Then he realizes what he's saying and adds, "Oh, and the money could have been given to the poor." But John is not impressed with Judas' words and exposes Judas as a thief.

Now, you might be wondering why then Judas is not identified as part of the family. Well, it's quite possible that because Judas is the betrayer, John wants to protect this family's reputation. If this was indeed the case, and his disciple Judas was part of this family, then that would help explain

why Jesus had such a special friendship with the family of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha.

Alright, now let's reflect on the text. The anointing of Jesus is an act of pure extravagance, underscored by the comment that the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. Mary has anointed Jesus so lavishly that all present can participate in it. This is the second time a scent has been connected with this family. In 11:39 Martha worried about the odor of Lazarus' rotting corpse. Here, however, the odor is the marvelous fragrance of nard. The odor of death has been replaced by the odor emanating from Mary's extravagant love. (Woman's Bible Commentary)

This fragrance of Mary's love for Jesus is intimately connected to memory. Jesus himself makes the connection of this event to memory when he says, "wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her." We are a people connected by memories - memories of what God has done in the past, and the hope we have in the promises God has made for our future.

Studies have been done that show that the sense of smell helps to trigger our memories. The fragrance in the room prompts Jesus to say that Mary's act will be remembered wherever the gospel is preached. Two of the three gifts that the wise men brought to the infant Jesus, myrrh and

frankincense, were perfumes. For me personally, memories come flooding back to me of my childhood whenever I smell Korean food cooking. What smells trigger your memory? It may be the scent of your mother's perfume, or the smell of a campfire. Perhaps it's the aroma of a special tree or plant. Fragrance helps us to remember. Now, what is it that we should remember from this story?

Well, this text tells us that we should remember Jesus' sacrifice. The anointing anticipates Jesus' death and burial. Jesus will be anointed with fragrant spices again when he is laid in the tomb (19: 38-42). This text does not deal with his victory (that comes later); it prefigures his costly, saving death. We are to remember Jesus' costly grace.

Another thing we are to remember is the depth of Mary's love for Jesus, which is signaled by the extravagance of her gift. Mary models what it means to be a disciple. Jesus reminds us of our responsibility to do good to the poor. He also commends Mary for her lavish gift. How extravagant are our gifts to God? Do we lavish God with our best gifts, or do we tend to give him our leftovers? How much of our time, effort, and money do we offer to God?

Finally, the good news is that Jesus Christ is not only in our memories, he has conquered death and is here with us today. God has been

extravagant with us. Let us follow Mary's example and show extravagant love to God. Amen.