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John 11:55-12:11

Thirty-fifth Message

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EXTRAVAGANT LOVE

Following the story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead, John's gospel is rapidly approaching the accounts of the Upper Room and the Passion. There are three stories left in chapter 12: the anointing of Jesus by Mary, the triumphal entry, and some final comments on the occasion when a number Gentiles visit Jerusalem, hoping to see Jesus. Today we will look at the story of the anointing of Jesus. The setting for this incident actually begins at the end of chapter 11.

Now the Passover of the Jews was near, and many went up to Jerusalem out of the country before the Passover to purify themselves. So they were seeking for Jesus, and were saying to one another as they stood in the temple, "What do you think; that He will not come to the feast at all?" Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where He was, he was to report it, so that they might seize Him. (John 11:55-57 NASB)

This is the third Passover mentioned in John's gospel. The first is in chapter 2, the occasion when Jesus cleansed the temple, while the second appears in chapter 6, when he fed the multitude. According to John's time line, Jesus' ministry lasted a little over two years. The first Passover would have been in A.D. 28, 46 years after the temple rebuilding began, according chapter 2. Therefore, the third Passover would have come in A.D. 30. So there are three Passovers: in the beginning, the middle, and at the end of John's account.

As we have already seen, the Passover is closely tied to the Exodus, the landmark event in the history of the Jews. The exodus motif is central to John, connecting to the new exodus in Jesus. Passover reminds the reader that the one who raised Lazarus from the dead leads us out of slavery and death. He is the Lamb of God who is about to go to his own death and become the Passover Lamb.

Prior to Passover, pilgrims began arriving in Jerusalem in the thousands to purify themselves for the feast, as stipulated in Numbers 9:6. The appropriate rites lasted for one week prior the feast. On this particular Passover everyone was talking about Jesus, as they were at the debate during the Feast of Tabernacles, in 7:11. People were curious as to whether Jesus would appear, particularly since the Sanhedrin had put out a contract on his life, as we saw in our last study.

This is the culmination of the rising tension which we have noted throughout John's gospel, in 7:25, 32; 8:59; 10:31, 39. Everyone knew about the Sanhedrin's intended action, since they had given orders to be informed of Jesus' whereabouts. The crowds are standing in the old temple while they are talking about the new, spiritual temple. The resurrection of Lazarus points to the end of the old temple and the beginning of the new temple and the new creation. God never intended to live in a house, but in the hearts of people.

I can envision Jesus creating the kind of buzz and excitement that we often experience when celebrities appear in public. A few years ago, when my wife and I were in New York, we learned that near where we were staying there was to be a screening of a new Mel Gibson movie. We thought it would be fun to see if we could get a glimpse of the star, so we stood outside the theatre along with many others and watched as cars drove up and different celebrities arrived. Every time a car arrived we'd crane out necks, wondering if it was Mel. Finally, when he did arrive, there was a flurry of activity. My wife actually walked through the crowd and right in front of Mel to get a closer look. That made her week. There is something exciting about seeing a celebrity. Well, that was the kind of anticipation and curiosity evident all over Jerusalem as Passover approached. The place was buzzing. Everyone was asking, "Will Jesus come to the feast?"

Jesus, therefore, six days before the Passover, came to Bethany where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So they made Him a supper there, and Martha was serving; but Lazarus was one of those reclining at the table with Him. Mary then took a pound of very costly perfume of pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. (12:1-3)

Jesus arrives in Bethany six days before Passover. The dinner held in his honor is a natural way to express joy, following the restoration of life to the dead. This probably was the Sabbath dinner before the Triumphal Entry, which came on the following day, although John's chronology is different from the other gospels.

We will compare John's account of the anointing of Jesus with the other three gospels. Each of the gospels includes

an account of a woman anointing Jesus with perfume (Matt 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; Luke 7:36-38). The account in Luke 7 took place in Galilee, at the home of Simon the Pharisee. The unnamed woman is described as a sinner (some think it was Mary Magdalene); the poor are not mentioned, and it was not a friendly environment. Clearly, Luke is saying something different from the other writers.

The accounts in Matthew and Mark are the same, and both are similar to John. The story takes place in Bethany, at the home of Simon the leper, according to Matthew and Mark; the ointment is pure nard; there is a debate about selling the perfume and giving the proceeds to the poor; the perfume is worth 300 denarii, and Jesus defends the woman and makes reference to his burial.

But there are differences as well. Matthew and Mark place the story after the Triumphal Entry, while John says it took place before that event. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus is anointed on the head, but in John he is anointed on the feet. It seems that Matthew and Mark want to show Jesus consecrated and honored as a king. However, John's point of view is different, so it seems best just to leave his account as it stands.

At the dinner are Jesus' friends, Martha, Mary and Lazarus. They continue to be major players in the first scene of chapter 12, as they were in chapter 11. Martha is helping serve the meal, which we assume was held at the home of Simon the leper (obviously, Simon had been healed by Jesus). Serving seems to be Martha's gift, as we note also in Luke 10. We don't necessarily have to read anything negative into Martha's character. In Luke 10, she does get anxious and worried, upset at Mary for not helping, but there is no indication of that here. Some people are like Martha: they love to serve by doing things for others.

Lazarus is at the table with Jesus, partaking of the food. What a delightful time they must have had talking about what had happened in the past few weeks. I'd like to have heard that conversation. Last year, a group of our singles ministered in a Mayan village in the Yucatan Peninsula. On our last night there, while most of us were enjoying fellowship around the table, one of our team members became very sick – so sick that we called an ambulance to take him to the hospital. We were all very concerned as we gathered to pray. Matt didn't rise from the dead, but it sure seemed like it. Later, the team had a meal, and Matt shared how God had worked through his sickness and recovery. It was amazing. I can imagine that the table fellowship that Jesus and Lazarus shared at their meal was amazing as well.

Adding to the drama is the fact that Jesus is not the only one who is in trouble with the religious authorities. Looking ahead to verse 9 we read:

The large crowd of the Jews then learned that He was there; and they came, not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He raised from the dead. But the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death also; because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and were believing in Jesus. (12:9-11)

Not only had the Sanhedrin put out a contract on Jesus, they had a contract on Lazarus as well. We have no information concerning what happened to Lazarus, but we do know he faced the same hostile reaction as Jesus himself. And yet, as the two shared a meal together in Bethany they had a wonderful time of fellowship.

During the meal, as they were reclining at table, Mary approaches Jesus. Kneeling down, she anoints his feet with perfume. As we saw in chapter 11, Mary is more emotional than her sister. (We remember that Mary fell at Jesus' feet prior to the raising of Lazarus.) The actions of Mary are recorded to contrast those of the arrogant religious leaders. The death threats to Jesus and Lazarus frame the story of Mary. The chief priests and Pharisees want to kill Jesus and Lazarus, but Mary wants to adore the Lord. In this account, Mary is also a contrast to the disciples in the next chapter, who must be taught to wash one another's feet.

The amount of perfume is considerable – about 11 ounces. Nard is an oil extracted from the root and spike of the nard plant, which is grown in India. The bottle was filled with pure oil. This amount of perfume was worth 300 denarii, roughly equivalent to a year's wages for a fully employed worker. The perfume's purity, quantity and origin account for its appalling cost.

Mary doesn't use a towel, but wipes Jesus' feet with her hair. This is not an act that a woman would do in public, but she doesn't care what others think. Since there was a full bottle of ointment, perhaps Jesus' whole body was anointed. The house is filled with the fragrance of the perfume, suggesting that this fragrance will extend far beyond the event itself: the fragrance of the gospel will eventually fill the whole world. The point is not the cost, but Mary's utter devotion, coupled with her complete disregard for what others thought.

Mary's action is an act of incredible humility and extravagant love. She is completely free to worship the Lord in a lavish way, one that is not efficient, economical or practical. In this story, Mary stands out, but all three of Jesus' friends are able to enter into the presence of Jesus and worship him in some way – Martha serving, Lazarus fellowshiping, and Mary adoring.

I am probably a bit more like Martha. I am very practical. Most of the time I prefer serving in the background. But my wife is more like Mary. She isn't self-conscious or put off

by what others think. She is not controlled by the clock; she is able to let go and enter into the mystery of Christ.

A few years ago, she and I were driving around the Tuscan hills in Italy. We came upon a beautiful monastery perched high on a hill, in the middle of nowhere. As we walked around the building, my wife was completely and prayerfully drawn into the presence of Christ. The many paintings and frescos aided her artistic nature to worship. The singing of monks filled the sanctuary. As she began to worship, I was drawn in as well. Her spirit of adoration was contagious. It was a very holy time for the two of us to share. This is what Mary was doing – adoring the Lord Jesus.

But Judas gets upset with Mary.

But Judas Iscariot, one of His disciples, who was intending to betray Him, said, “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to poor people?” Now he said this, not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it. Therefore Jesus said, “Let her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of My burial. For you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have Me.” (12:4-8)

Judas asks why the perfume wasn't sold and the proceeds given to the poor. Although it is unclear, the name “Bethany” might actually mean “house of the poor.” The treasurer cannot help thinking about the balance sheet. But Judas's concern for the poor is designed to mask his personal greed. He carried the money box that was used to meet the disciples' needs and provide alms to the poor. In fact, according to John, when Judas left the Upper Room after the Last Supper, the disciples thought he had left to give alms to the poor. Those who were devoted to Jesus' ministry probably replenished the money used by the Lord and his disciples. But Judas was a thief who pilfered from the money box. He was saving up to buy some land. This is the only place in the New Testament where Judas is actually called a thief.

Jesus makes a statement about the poor and his imminent death. It's hard to understand exactly what he meant by Mary keeping the ointment for his burial. How could she keep it since she had already poured it out? Perhaps Mary had not given it to the poor but had kept it for such an occasion.

Jesus states an absolute principle when he says, “For you always have the poor with you.” He would not always be with them. Since he would be leaving soon, Mary's devotion is not to be criticized, least of all by those who operate out of double standards. No one, not even Mary, knew that Jesus was about to die. She was doing something better than she knew. She was anointing his body for burial ahead of time, since there would not be an opportunity later. And

not only was she anointing his body for burial, perhaps here is another pointer to the Exodus. In the exodus journey, the tent of meeting, the tabernacle, the utensils, the altar and the priests were anointed with a holy oil, and its fragrance filled the tent. As Mary anoints the new tabernacle, the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us, we are able to enter into the new exodus in Jesus.

Mary's devotion to Jesus is also in contrast with Judas' mean spirit that calculates the cost of everything. Despite the fact that he is a thief, he is not free to lavishly love Jesus. In Matthew and Mark, all of the disciples reckoned that what Mary did was impractical and wasteful.

We see in this story a beautiful picture of three people enjoying, serving, fellowshiping and worshipping the Lord, even in the midst of dire straits. We will focus on just two questions.

First, are we free to lavishly worship and adore the Lord? Maybe we don't have Mary's gift, maybe we are more like Martha or Lazarus, but that shouldn't keep us uptight and stifled from entering into the full mystery and wonder of Jesus. What Mary did for the Lord was a very special act for a special purpose, but it provides for us a picture that can be a great encouragement. In the book of Revelation, the heavenly scene of the Enthroned Lamb is all about unceasingly praise and worship.

Some of us might be like the disciples: we have a hard time worshipping; everything has to be purposeful or practical. Some may have come from frugal backgrounds. Some have training in engineering. I fit into both of these categories. Like the disciples, we spend time with Jesus, we come to church, but we find it hard to let go and adore the one who shed his blood for us, the one who became the Passover Lamb.

Perhaps it might be helpful to have a “sanctuary” where we could read God's word and pray. Perhaps it might be helpful to use art or music to help us turn our thoughts away from our to-do lists and place our focus on Jesus. Just as my wife is a tremendous aid to me, there are those within the body who are very gifted in this way; they can help to lead us through prayer and their ability to freely worship.

Worship is at the heart of our spiritual life. It isn't a practical or efficient use of our time or money. All too often worship gets squeezed out of our busy schedules. We will always have too much to do, we will always have the poor with us, but worship is what keeps us centered on Christ and the cross. Worship is what brings true rest to our souls. Worship is what defines us as God's people. If we allow ourselves to freely serve and worship, our lives too will become a fragrance that will fill the room. And the church that worships together becomes a fragrance of the gospel to the whole world. What a great encouragement to us.

The second question then by extension is, Are we free to lavishly love other people? If we understand what Jesus has done and continues to do for us, then our adoration of him will spill over into grace and compassion for others. Jesus will say about the sinful woman in Luke 7 who anoints his feet, “For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little” (7:47).

The grace and love of God is an endless supply through the Holy Spirit who indwells us. As we share and give out God’s grace through our time, money and hearts, there is no depletion of our resources. It is like always having a full tank of gas no matter how far we drive. When we are skimpy and calculating, uptight and critical of how people spend money and time, that is an indication that we are not receiving God’s lavish riches in Christ Jesus.

Again, this can be hard for many of us, especially if we grew up with little resources. It is hard for us to be impractical and to let go. But Mary teaches us that we don’t always have to be practical or efficient in loving others. We don’t always have to have a coupon or make a deal.

A wonderful illustration of how our lavish love can affect the hearts of others can be seen in the movie *Babette’s Feast*, in which a lavish meal prepared by a young French girl changes the dour hearts of the elders in a small Danish village. God’s grace to us becomes our grace to others. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13:3, “If I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.”

This story in John is about the centrality of worship. As we adore the Lamb of God who shed his blood for us and takes away our sin, we allow our hearts to be filled with his grace, and then that grace becomes a fragrance of life to others.

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