

John's Gospel is known as the "mystical Gospel," but I have to tell you: this little story is more than mystical; it is absolutely brimming with unexpected and outrageous surprises. Some of them would have been scandalous to first century Mediterranean ears; shocking, even.

The story begins with the recently dead Lazarus sitting at the dinner table waiting for someone to pass him the matzah. It ends with Jesus reprimanding a disciple and upsetting the party atmosphere by pointing out his impending death and reminding people of the never-ending stream of marginalized people.

Martha and the rest of the disciples seem to be behaving as people were expected to, but they are only mentioned in passing. In between the formerly-dead-but-now-alive Lazarus and the now-alive-but-soon-to-be-dead-and-then-alive-again Jesus, there are two other people.

We've met them before. Right there in the middle like cheese and turkey between two slices of bread. Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, and Judas Iscariot. Judas shows up in John's Gospel back in the sixth chapter, where we are told that Judas, son of Simon Iscariot, was going to betray Jesus. From then on, John reminds us of that detail every time Judas's name pops up.

And if betraying the Son of God weren't bad enough, John's Gospel gives us still more evidence of Judas's evil. When Judas objects to money wasted on perfume, the all-seeing narrator makes sure we aren't fooled by his protest. No, he's a liar and a thief who doesn't give a rip about the poor. You can almost see him twirling his mustache, can't you?

Who would expect such an obvious villain to ask this question, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" Why say anything at all, let alone a perfectly reasonable question, and it is a reasonable posture. Imagine if I told the vestry, "Someone has donated \$40,000 and I'm spending it all on a new crucifix." They would be fiscally irresponsible if they didn't at least suggest that it might go to replace the heating ducts downstairs or that maybe a little of it could go to fixing our leaking roof and the rest given to Operation Nightwatch or to the Diocese of Jerusalem. It's *such* a

reasonable question, in fact, that in Matthew's Gospel and Mark's, the question comes from the disciples. A good question from an unexpected source, but not the most startling part of the story. Not the part that would have made first century Mediterraneans positively squirmy.

That comes from Mary of Bethany. A *little* unexpected for women to be eating in the same room with men, but many people were aware of Jesus' inclusive attitude. *More* unexpected for a woman to anoint a man with oil—that was for men to do. In Jewish history, Samuel anointed Saul to be Israel's first king. Through a good part of European history, male Popes anointed male emperors.

But there are far more scandalous details: Mary let down her hair. Now, you and I might find that harmless, but her culture expected women to *always* wear their hair braided in public unless they meant to advertise that they were prostitutes. Furthermore, Jewish men were not even supposed to touch wet objects that women had touched, much less touch women who were not their wives. And a man allowing a woman to touch his wet feet?

Now, people did wash their own feet all the time and sometimes slaves washed their masters' feet, but beyond that people didn't wash each other's feet. And single Jewish women just simply did not wash the feet of single Jewish men (at least in public).

This is a flagrantly uncomfortable story.

There are people who see Mary's unusual gesture as her taking on the role of a humble slave by washing Jesus' feet. Maybe. But her hair is down and she is drying his feet with it. Whatever else she intended, she's at least *acting* a little affectionately, maybe not like a slave but, frankly, more like a lover.

And then there's that perfume. The costly perfume of pure nard was never a regular feature of foot washing, and in this context the nard is troublesome. There were first century Greek plays that openly ridiculed this kind of display as comic debauchery. So if the Greeks found this behavior outlandish, with their far greater tolerance for decadence, just imagine how more strait-laced Hebrews must have reacted.

Mary not only let down her hair, but as if to punctuate her impropriety, she used an entire *pound* of *insanely expensive* perfume. Think about it: If you spilled

one ounce of Chanel No. 5 in a dining room full of guests, they'd run for the doors, choking. The smell might actually have been worse than the aroma wafting off of poor old Lazarus. And *that* ounce would only have run you about \$125. An ounce of what Mary was pouring out would have cost somewhere closer to \$2,500; a pound might go for \$40,000. That's beyond luxurious. That's beyond lavish. That's ludicrous.

So ludicrous, in fact, that it arouses disapproval. Mary's actions are not prudent, not modest and not sensible. And the practical and fairly restrained response to her excess comes from the lips of Judas. The *words* Judas speaks are not wrong; Jesus actually confirms them with his reference to Deuteronomy 15: "There will always be poor people in the land," it reads. "*Therefore,*" it goes on, "I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor."

Judas's spoken words are appropriate, reasonable and defensible. Mary's silent actions are intimate, sensual and vulnerable. But no matter how comfortably in-bounds Judas's words were—no matter how uncomfortably out-of-bounds Mary's actions were—Jesus discerned the truer heart. Judas knew what it meant to be *disciplined*. Mary knew what it meant to be a *disciple*.

Jesus understood and accepted Mary's act as an act of love. Not the act of a slave forced to be submissive, mind you, but the act of a lover *choosing* to abandon all protocol to convey the depth of her love. How often have the prophets reminded us that what God wants is not sacrifice, but love; not burnt offerings, but relationship. How often has God acted with unexpected love for and through unexpected people.

No one expected David to amount to much more than a shepherd boy, but he became a king. Sarah didn't expect to have children, but God established a dynasty through her. Moses was the unexpected leader of the Israelites to freedom and Miriam the unexpected prophet who taught the children of Israel to sing of God's victory over the Egyptians.

Next week we will revisit the crowds of people who expected the messiah to ride into Jerusalem a king, only to see their teacher, a carpenter and itinerant preacher, murdered by the Romans. The week after that, we will rejoice in the most unexpected outpouring of God's love in all Christian scripture when the

crucifixion that so many expected to be the *end* of the story turns out to be just the beginning.

At the beginning of today's Gospel, the formerly-dead-but-now-alive Lazarus sits with loved ones at the dinner table. At the end of the reading, the now-alive-but-soon-to-be-dead-and-then-alive-again Jesus sits with loved ones at the dinner table. In between, there is a completely rational offering based on false piety and an utterly irrational offering based on over-the-top, extravagantly wasteful love.

In a few minutes, we will gather at this table with loved ones and the Risen Christ who abides with us. Not because we are correct or deserving. Not even because we fully understand what we are doing. Certainly, not because God intends for us to demean ourselves. We gather at the table with the Risen Christ and each other because worship is our natural, heart-felt and unbridled out-pouring in response to God's love poured out for us.

We will also continue to put aside some canned goods for some of our neighbors and we'll put socks on some of their feet, and those on the margins will always be with us. But not in the sense that there will forever be people in need. With us in the sense that they will actually be with us, *here* at God's table, showing up in all manner of unexpected ways. God's unrelenting, immodest and excessive love for us spills out into the streets; fills us to over-flowing so that God's love sloshes all over and the aroma fills the world so that others can wonder and come seeking.

A reasonable and appropriate God might show a little restraint. Instead, God's overabundance entrances human hearts with the lazy circling of a hawk in a cornflower blue sky. Or God romances human hearts in the soft echoes of chant fading into the rafters of a sanctuary. Or God exerts an irresistible pull on still others in Scripture. In a simple gesture of gratitude or kindness.

Even if we don't always remember it or feel it or even seem to have access to it, God loves us and loves us excessively. That's why we love God with all our hearts and all our souls and all our minds. The God who unexpectedly used Mary to anoint God's Son will also use us. We are the unexpectedly odd people that God has taken as God's beloved. Come to this table, then, be fed by the Risen Christ as God's loved ones.