

Devotion to Jesus? Service to the Poor? An Interpretation of John 12:1-8



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Co-missioners,

Today's offering features Steve Kuhl probing a key question that surfaced in lots of churches this past Sunday through the Gospel reading for the day. This was St. John's account of Mary, the sister of Lazarus, anointing Jesus' feet. Steve observed in a note to us that the matters at issue here will resurface in the Gospel for Maundy Thursday, a mere seven days hence. We agree, as will you-see, for example, the final sentence of the essay-and with that in mind are happy to pass it along even though it will seem on the surface to be arriving a week too late.

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

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**Crossing Devotion to Jesus and Service to the Poor: An
Interpretation of John 12:1-8**

by Steve Kuhl

Last Sunday's Gospel reading takes us to John 12:1-8 (Lent 5, Series C, Revised Common Lectionary). It featured Mary's anointing of the feet of Jesus and Judas' criticism of her for "wasting" such expensive oil on Jesus, arguing that the money could have been better used to help the poor. From a "historical" perspective, this text has been somewhat of a puzzle for biblical scholars since similar stories appear in each of the Synoptic Gospels (Mt 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; and Luke 7:36-50). Luke places it in the early days of Jesus' Galilean ministry where it illustrates the connection between forgiveness and love. (As Jesus tells his host, those who are forgiven much will express this by loving much). Matthew and Mark do as John does and use this story as an introduction to the passion.

However, John significantly reworks it to fit his narrative flow. Specifically, he makes it a sequel to the raising of Lazarus (unique to John) and situates it in the home of in the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary, six days before the Passover and in the context of plots to kill both Lazarus and Jesus. Then he directs its meaning towards the importance of reverencing Jesus' impending death. Here I will put the historical question aside and focus on the meaning toward which John bends the story.



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Typical of John, the story has a multi-faceted purpose in the narrative, even though it has a very specific point it wishes to teach us. From a literary point of view, it marks a turning point in John's overall narrative. A quick recap: John divides his Gospel into three major sections, first "the prologue" (1:1-18), which introduces us to John's major themes; then the "book of signs," where John links Jesus' public ministry to his death and resurrection through the use of six major "sign" stories, from the changing of water into wine (2:11) to the raising of Lazarus (11:1-57); and finally, "the book of glory"

in which John gives the account of Jesus' glory, i.e., his death and resurrection as the way to salvation, the purpose for which he has come (12:1-21:25).

Our text functions as a hinge between the "book of signs:" and the "book of glory." It takes us from Jesus' disclosure of himself through signs to his revealing of himself as God's crucified and risen Messiah, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (cf. 1:29) and in whom there is life (cf. 1:3b-5). As this point in the drama, Jesus has just raised Lazarus from the dead. The animosity of the religious establishment toward him has reached its peak in open plans to put him to death (11:53) and the issuance of an arrest order (11:57). Such is the "cost" of raising the dead. This opposition to Jesus is so widely known that people are speculating whether he will dare to go to Jerusalem for the Passover. (11:56). Jesus himself is aware that "the hour has come," that the countdown to his death has started (cf. 12:23)

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The text begins, benignly enough, with Jesus at the home of Lazarus where a dinner is being celebrated in thanksgiving for Lazarus' rising from the dead. Understandably, Jesus is at the center of the celebration and Lazarus' sisters are in those familiar roles that we know from Luke's Gospel (Lk 10:38-41): Martha is serving the meal and Mary is showing forth her piety, her faith. At this hinge moment, Mary's piety takes center stage. Seemingly out of the blue she takes very expensive oil and anoints Jesus' feet. We do not yet know what this extravagant act means. But it certainly raises the ire of Judas, who gives what sounds to be an equally pious criticism of her. "This money could have been used for the poor!" he says.

With this, a major question emerges that seems to have been on

the mind of John's community—and on ours too, I suggest. What is more important? Devotion to Jesus or helping the poor? Spoiler alert.: this, as we will see, is a misleading question. For it errantly pits devotion to Jesus (faith) and helping the poor (good works) against one another. The better question to ask is “how are good works possible?” To this the answer is “through faith in Christ.” This, I submit, is the key to understanding Jesus' response to Judas and, more broadly, to the apparent conflict of interests between devotion and service.

Here it is important to note who sets up the question of faith and good works as a conflict of interests—not Mary, but Judas. It is also important to note who is *genuine* in their piety and who is not—not Judas, but Mary. We know this about them from the parenthetical notes John gives us.

Judas, John tells us, cares nothing for the poor. On the contrary, while he may put on the air of care, he does so only to cover up his “greed” (v. 6). Later, in the upper room, we will see what is really in Judas's heart—not care for the poor, but the betraying of Jesus. Still, Judas' air of care for the poor is so convincing that, even after Jesus identifies him as the betrayer (13:26-27) and sends him out to do what he must do quickly, the disciples think Jesus is sending him out “to give something to the poor” (13:29).

By contrast, we know about the genuineness of Mary's faith/devotion from the description of the ointment and from Jesus' retort to Judas. Concerning the ointment, it is described as being both “genuine” (literally, “faithful” *nard*, *pistikās* in Greek) and “costly” (a sacrifice of thanksgiving). There is no doubt that Mary's devotion is extravagant. Concerning the retort, when Jesus says to Judas, “Leave her [alone]...” (vs 7a), he is saying that he will not let his faithful be bullied and confused by the fake piety of the faithless. But even more

important is Jesus' explanation as to why he honors and values Mary's act of devotion. "Leave her [alone]," he says, "so that on the day of my burial she may keep it" (vs. 7b).

To be sure, this phrase is awkward both in Greek and in English translation. As a result, numerous suggestions have been given as to what it might mean. But I think its meaning is clear. On one level, Mary's anointing of Jesus could be taken to mean that Mary is showing her deep devotion and gratitude to Jesus for having raised her brother from the dead. But Jesus desires for her even more than this. Jesus wants her to "keep it" (i.e., keep this show of devotion or faith) for the day, still to come, when he will be crucified, dead and buried. For he, too, will rise again. But Jesus will not be raised like Mary's brother Lazarus was raised, still subject to death. Rather, Jesus will be raised "in glory," no longer subject to death, to become the source of resurrection and eternal life itself (cf. 11:25). Whether Mary did "keep it" on the day of Jesus' burial we have no way of knowing. John is silent about the reaction of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus to the passion of their Lord. But we have no reason to think they didn't, especially, in light of how John describes others who showed great devotion for the crucified Jesus: to wit, the women "standing near the cross" (19:25), the beloved disciple (19:26), Joseph of Arimathea (19:38), and even Nicodemus 19:39). But even more important is the fact that the post-resurrection church will "keep it," as will be evident in its apostolic witness (Chapter 21).



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Jesus closes his retort to Judas with the words: "You always

have the poor with you, but you don't always have me" (vs. 8). This terse statement has been troubling to many interpreters because it has often been heard as pitting helping the poor (doing good works) against devotion to Jesus (faith in Christ). But that is a mishearing of it. Let me try to unpack its carefully worded meaning.

When Jesus says "you will always have the poor with you," he means that literally. He means by it that you will experience no limit to the amount of good works that need to be done by you for the poor in the course of your daily life. Literally, "you will always have the poor with you"; your life will be bombarded by the need to do good works. Unfortunately for the poor, the world is also filled with people like Judas—like us?—who, at best, feign concern for the poor but never embrace them. The real question, then, is this: "how are good works, genuine concern for the poor, possible?" The answer is clear: through devotion to and faith in the crucified Jesus Christ.

Likewise, when Jesus says "you will not always have me," he also means that quite literally. It means that there will be a limit to the opportunities you will have to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. Therefore, when you do, "seize the moment" as Mary did. Don't live in betrayal as Judas did, whose life was really a betrayal to both the poor and Jesus. Rather, let your devotion be extravagant, wholehearted, single-minded, so that your love for the poor might be equally extravagant, wholehearted, single-minded. For without extravagance of devotion for Jesus there can be no extravagance in love for the poor.

Therefore, faith does have a priority over good works, not because good works are not important, but because only by faith are genuine good works possible. We will hear more about this in Jesus' upper room discourse with his disciples. Just as Mary in our text anoints Jesus' feet as a sign of her devotion to him,

so, in the upper room, Jesus will wash his disciples' feet as a sign of his service to them, a service which they are to embody as well. Therefore, to be devoted to Jesus is to be devoted to his service; to be genuine in doing good works means to be genuine in faith and devotion to Christ. But the order of things is crucial: one can become a faithful servant like Jesus (given to good works) only if one is first willing to be served by Jesus (devoted wholly to him who died and rose for our salvation). That's the essence of the new commandment he gave his disciples on the night of his betrayal: "love one another as I have loved you" (15:12).

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use

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