

Fifth Sunday in Lent

THE FRAGRANCE OF GRACE

John 12:1-8

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Analysis by Paige G. Evers

1 Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 3 Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. 4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5 "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" 6 (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) 7 Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8 You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

DIAGNOSIS: What Do You Value?

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Critical*

Jesus is the one for whom a dinner is being given. It's Jesus' feet that are being anointed with extravagant perfume. Yet Judas Iscariot is the one who speaks first. He speaks in order to criticize and object. "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?," he asks (v. 5). Judas appears to be speaking out of selfless concern, but

John tells us otherwise. In an aside, John notes, “he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it” (v. 6). There Judas is, eating alongside a man who Jesus brought back to life (Lazarus, in v. 1). He’s just witnessed an act of generous love (Mary, in v. 3). But he’s a thief, so he views the experience through a thief’s eyes. Thinking only of the value that perfume could have had for him, he voices his objection under the guise of caring for the poor.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Greedy

To borrow a phrase from the epistle reading for the day, Judas’ confidence is in the wrong place (see Phil. 3:4b-8). His mind and heart are focused on gaining material benefits, whether from hawking Mary’s expensive perfume, or, as John hints, from betraying his Lord (v. 4). Judas values money and comfort above all else. The only thing he regards as loss is a missed opportunity for a quick denarii. With his heart trusting in the sound of clinking coins in his pocket, it’s no wonder the sight of Lazarus at the table and the selfless act of Mary pouring perfume on Jesus’ feet are lost on him.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : Lost

The events of that dinner in Bethany are not all that’s lost, however. Anyone whose heart clings to money, to the appearance of caring about the poor, or to one’s own righteousness will be lost when God’s judgment occurs. As a thief, Judas could pose as one who was concerned about those less fortunate while stealing from the common purse. As a sinner facing God’s wrath, his posing days are over. God sees right through our pious objections and criticisms of others and right into the darkness of our hearts. Our true values are exposed. As a result, we are lost.

PROGNOSIS: The One Who Values You

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Buried for You*

Finally, after Mary anoints Jesus' feet with the perfume and wipes them with her hair (v. 3) and after Judas objects to her extravagant act, Jesus speaks. He is the guest of honor at this dinner after all, and when he speaks, it is to announce the only thing that can prevent the sinners sitting with him, and all sinners, from being lost for good. After telling Judas to back off, he gives his dinner companions a hint of what is to come. He explains that Mary bought the expensive perfume "so that she might keep it for the day of my burial" (v. 7). Jesus is about to accomplish the only thing that will redeem sinners of all kinds, including thieves like Judas. Jesus will be put to death on the cross and buried, and then God will raise him up to new life. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, and now Lazarus is eating alongside him (v. 1), but he is still living a mortal life. But God will raise Jesus from the dead, never to die again. In the cross and resurrection, God will conquer sin and death once and for all.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Generous*

Trusting in this God, the One who gave up his Son, instead of in the gods of money and self-gain, is what allows Mary to give up her costly perfume. Where Judas' heart is greedy, hers is generous. Jesus has raised her brother Lazarus from the dead, and Mary responds with devotion and love. Gratitude flows out of her heart in the form of washing Jesus' feet and wiping them with her hair.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *An Outpouring of Love for All*

Expressing gratitude for what God has done for us in the cross and resurrection doesn't end when we show our thanks to Jesus himself. There are countless other people around us who need us

to pour ourselves out for their sake. And it may be costly at times. It may be difficult. There may be competing forces urging us to keep our treasures for ourselves instead of sharing with others. But when we keep our gaze focused on Jesus, the one who was raised from the dead, we can go ahead and pour out the costly perfume of ourselves, our time, and our love. When we do that, our houses, our neighborhoods, our workplaces, and our whole world will be filled with the beautiful fragrance (v. 3) of God's forgiveness, love, and grace.