

Fifth Sunday in Lent

A STRANGE ANOINTING OF A STRANGE KING

John 12:1-8

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Analysis by Cathy Lessmann

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 the 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: Nothing Makes Sense!

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *A Strange Anointing*

Everyone knows that Jesus' life is in jeopardy, that there's a contract on his head. If he has an ounce of common sense, he'll avoid Jerusalem. But here he is in Bethany, a stone's throw away, having dinner with Lazarus and his sisters. Unexpectedly, Mary pours so much expensive perfume on his feet that the smell

fills the entire house; this is strange because normally, anointings are done on heads or faces. Then she wipes his feet with her hair. Again strange because respectable women are supposed to keep their hair bound and covered. Judas stewes over the waste of costly oil he calculates could bring in a good chunk of money. The details seem all wrong: If this is an anointing then a prophet or the community leaders should be doing the anointing, certainly not a no-count woman. And if this is a special person anointed for a holy purpose, why such lowliness? Where's the pomp?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *This Doesn't Make Sense!*

This anointing depicts one of the two diametrically opposed responses to Jesus' raising of Lazarus. Mary responds with overflowing love and gratitude. Judas responds with self concern. The Jewish authorities responded with plots of murder. Jesus sees right through them all; he understands that their responses reveal something about their hearts. So he praises Mary, and criticizes the others. Clearly evident is the stranglehold grip that the Law has on Judas and the authorities; call it the "shoulds" of the Law: Money should be spent on the poor, a Messiah should be anointed on the head, a Messiah should use power to right political wrongs, temple authorities should call the shots. Judas uses the "shoulds" of the Law to disguise his selfishness; the authorities use it to mask their lust for power. Whatever the use, "should" becomes a straightjacket that prevents them from appreciating Jesus.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Knocked out of Their Senses*

Jesus reprimands Judas and defends Mary saying, "Leave her alone. She bought [the ointment] so that she might keep it for the day of my burial...you do not always have me (7, 8)." He implies that Mary has anointed his body in preparation for his

burial. Corpses, after all, are anointed on all parts of their bodies, including their feet. With this “anointing,” Mary unconsciously prophesies and prepares for Jesus’ death and burial. Likewise, Judas’ selfish behavior unwittingly brings about Jesus’ death. But if Jesus is who he said he is, namely, the Son of God, then to reject and kill him is equivalent to rejecting the One who sent him. “Those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (3:18).

PROGNOSIS: The Sense of the Cross

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Sense of the Cross*

It made no sense to Judas and the authorities that God’s “anointed one” could be so lowly: anointed (on his feet!) by a woman, entering the capital city on an ass (12:14), being “lifted up” as king (18:37; 19:19) on an executioner’s cross. It hardly makes sense to us! What makes sense in a world ruled by the Law is that sinners get what they deserve, namely, death. It makes sense for subjects to die to save their king. But a king who dies to save his subjects? Very strange. Yet, Mary’s anointing already underscores that he is a unique king, a king who dies for his subjects so that they can have the life he offers. Most ironically, Caiaphas had actually articulated that very fact just a few days prior when he said “...it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed” (11:50). But finally, what really turns our senses upside down is Jesus’ explanation that he came to save sinners, even the Judases and power-hungry authorities who dismiss Him.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Good Sense (“Shoulds”) becomes “Since”*

This is mercy so unheard of it doesn’t make sense! But when we

hear it, we believe it and even trust it. This mercy turns everything upside down until finally the “shoulds” of the Law (the things that make sense) are transformed into the “sinces” of the cross (about what the dying Savior-king has accomplished for sinners). Jesus becomes “priceless treasure” to his grateful subjects.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Living in the “Since” of the Cross*

Already with this humble anointing, Mary has left the “shoulds” behind and is operating based on the “sinces” of the cross. Her lavishness is not the strange wasteful act Judas thought it to be; in fact it is a normal behavior for Jesus-trusters. The sweet aroma of her gratitude fills the faith community, like incense rising up to heaven. And, with her, the selfless acts of fellow Jesus-trusters (all those freed to live in the “sinces” of the gospel) likewise send a sweet offering up to heaven.