THE LAST ACT OF KINDNESS

April 5, 2020

Your relationship to Jesus is the most important relationship in your life, because Jesus was sent by God to save us from our sins. He is, in the words of Scripture, the Son of God. In this day, when every headline is about COVID-19--where it is spreading, how it is spreading and what we can to do stop it, or not stop it--I want you to join with me in lifting your eyes up, out of the current crisis, to see Jesus, in all his beauty and strength, so that you might be renewed and encouraged and ready to not just see the beauty of Jesus, but do something beautiful for him.

When I used to work at a bank, some days were very, very stressful. On those days, I found it helpful to stand up and look. To stand up so I could see past my computer screen filled with nasty emails, past my cubical walls and look across the floor out the windows to the world around me. And when I did that, I would sometimes think to myself, God is good. The world is not ending. This trial will pass. So this morning, I encourage you to see and love the beauty and power of Jesus Christ, but also to respond with a beautiful gift of your own.

I'm not going to preach on the Triumphal Entry passage, but rather on something that happened right beforehand. According to Scripture, this is the last act of genuine kindness Jesus received before his crucifixion. And we learn much by meditating on Mary's motivation, Judas' judgmentalism and Jesus' response.

I will read John's gospel for the first part of the story, and Mark's gospel for the second, because each provide details that the other does not.

(John 12:1-6)

1 Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.

2 So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table.

3 Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said,

5 "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?"

6 He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it.

(Mark 14:6-11)
6 But Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me.

7 For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me.

8 She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial.

9 And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her."

10 Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them.

11 And when they heard it, they were glad and promised to give him money. And he sought an opportunity to betray him.

This morning's passage is a study in contrasts: a woman and a man, a friend and a traitor, a lover of God and a lover of money. Which are you?

Let's begin by studying Mary's motivation. Why did Mary give Jesus such a lavish gift?
There are two reasons.

1. The first is this: she was still overwhelmed with joy that Jesus had raised her brother, Lazarus, from the dead.

Lazarus is with them, at the feast in this house in Bethany, where Jesus is the guest of honor. Martha was serving food—always serving, Martha was. Lazarus was reclining, and Mary was suddenly overcome with the desire to express the depths of her love for Jesus Christ for making it all possible.

Now, some of you may object and say, "That's just the stuff of legends—" But like all miracles in the Bible, it's not recorded as an everyday event, but as an exceptional act of God's power. It is also the single best explanation for Mary's gift: she took what was probably the most expensive thing she owned—a perfume that was worth a year's wages (can we call it $40,000?) and poured it out on her Rabbi. She didn't just put a little bit on his hair, she poured out nearly a pound of perfume, starting on his head and down to his feet.

Receiving a loved one back from the grave would justify a gift of any size, wouldn't it? If you've lost someone you loved—especially if they died young—you may have done the same thing Mary did. No gift would be too large for Jesus: the savings, the house, it wouldn't matter.

But Mary wasn't just thankful for what Jesus had done—she was thankful for Jesus himself.

2. The second reasons for her lavish gift was this: She knew in her heart that Jesus was the Messiah sent by God.

She knew it because she knew Jesus. Not only had she seen the miracle, but she had studied at his feet. Luke 10:39 records that the first time Jesus ate with these sisters, Martha again was busy serving food,

but Mary, "sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said." She was his disciple. And God had given her eyes to see Jesus, not as a mere Rabbi, but as he really is: the Son of God, the Messiah.

Sit at Jesus' feet and learn from him. You are so willing to listen to all the other experts in our culture—and some of them do have really good things to teach and share—but none of them compares to Christ. None of them is the Word of God made human. Jesus said that listening to him and believing in him is like being filled with living water—you'll never go dry or empty in your soul if you are his disciple. Many of you listening are Christians. You know what I'm talking about. You have been called by God to follow Jesus—you can testify; it is not easy, but it is so very, very good. He gives us peace in the midst of crisis. Hope in the midst of despair. He is a beautiful, powerful Savior, who has loved us to the uttermost.

Mary knew these things. That is why she gave away a year's worth of wages and considered it an honor to do so. She poured out so much perfume that the whole house was filled with the beautiful fragrance. She anointed Jesus, honoring him as Lord, but, also unbeknownst to her, preparing his body for burial.

<u>But someone found fault with her gift: Judas Iscariot. Let's now look at Judas' hypocrisy.</u>

Verse 5-6 relay both his words, and his heart:

> **5 "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?"**
> **6 He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it.**

Judas was hiding behind compassion. One quick take-away is this: if you do something radically beautiful for Jesus—something close to what Mary did—some people might judge you for it. Please. Ignore them.

As I said, Judas was hiding behind compassion. He was pretending to care for the poor, but it wasn't the poor he loved—it was money, and all the power that money buys. Greed had utterly corroded his heart, like water on metal.

Iron is strong stuff. But if you put a trickle of water over a sheet of iron, eventually that strong, powerful iron starts to rust, and get weaker and thinner until one day, there's nothing there at all. Money was the water; Judas heart was the iron. Judas had given in over the course of his life so that his heart was rusted through, weak and available to Satan to do his bidding. Our hearts are no stronger. We need Jesus, because without him, we are no match for the steady trickle of temptation that both surrounds us and wells up within us.

At the very end of this passage, Mark writes, "**10 Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. 11 And when they heard it, they were glad and promised to give him money**." Do you how much they paid him? 30 Denarii.

Judas and Mary both listened to Jesus. Both saw him do the miraculous. Both, when viewed by others, were his disciples. So how come she lovingly blessed Jesus with 300 Denarii worth of perfume, while he betrays Jesus to his death for 30?

Because although they both saw Jesus, only one believed in him. Judas' hypocrisy shows us that unbelief can take many forms, even the form of charity and kindness. Don't be deceived by yourself or by others.

Ruthlessly evaluate the loves of your heart—study what motivates you, what drives you. Anything that you love more than Jesus must come down, whether its money, control, solitude, pleasure, other gods. Tear down the false idols of your heart. Smash them to pieces until only Jesus is there. This is daily work. Our idols regrow like dandelions in the lawn. You must be active in repenting and following the Spirit's lead, or before you know it, they're back, deep-rooted and deceptive as ever. As John Owens so famously said, "Be killing sin or it will be killing you."

We've looked at Mary's motivation and Judas' hypocrisy, now let's look at Jesus' response.

- First, he defends Mary.

"Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me."

Is it still possible to do beautiful things for Jesus? Yes, it is.

Unfortunately, sometimes, especially in Reformed churches, it seems like every time we talk about serving the Lord, someone feels compelled to quote Isaiah 64:6 where it says, "all our righteous acts are like filthy rags." But that's not what Jesus said to Mary, at all—did he?

He didn't say to the disciples, "Leave her alone, she doesn't know any better, but we all know this was just 'filthy rags!'" No—he says just the opposite. "She has done a beautiful thing to me."

Beautiful things for Jesus only come out of heart that takes time to sit learn and love what Christ has done. Think about his death for you. Ponder his teachings and miracles. Rejoice in his resurrected state, now, at the Father's side. Know that Redeemer lives and he is with you, and the perfume you pour out—even your very life, will be never enough to show Christ the depths of your love—but it will be all you can do. And it will be seen by the Lord, and loved by him. Christ said of Mary, "**She has done what she could,"** may he say the same thing of each of us.

After he defends Mary he rebukes Judas.
Some people misunderstand Jesus' reply and think Jesus is saying, don't help the poor—you'll never solve the problem of poverty, so why bother? That's not his point at all: Jesus consistently taught us that in serving the poor we are actually serving him. His point, rather, is that his time has come. "You will not always have me." And now, looking past this feast in Bethany, he sees the road to the cross clearly, and reveals to Mary what she actually done, **"she has anointed my body beforehand for burial."**

My wife recently gave me a suit jacket for my birthday. Imagine if I put it on and said, "Thank you, I love it. This is going to look great in my coffin." Even if I meant it sincerely, it's not the reply she would be looking for or expecting. It wouldn't bring joy to her heart, would it?

But the time had come for him to finish the work God has sent him to earth to accomplish: to be sacrificed for our sins. The Son of God was entering the City of God, to be crucified as the Lamb of God so that we might be saved. The greater the sacrifice, the more beautiful the gift. And none is more beautiful than Jesus. May Christ's Spirit fill you this week with patience in trial, joy in suffering, contentment in times of need, and a deep desire to do something beautiful for him in return.