

How Much Is Too Much” St. John 12:1-8

Families are composed of stories, stories that are told and then retold again and again. In my family of origin, the story of our leaving Pittsburg, Pa for Southern California is a classic. I was two years old when I was stuffed in my uncle’s car with my brother and my mom. Dad was to meet us at night at a place miles from Pittsburg, at a certain time. Through a comedy of missed busses and ‘hitched’ rides, dad made it to the rendezvous, sitting on his suitcase, with minutes to spare!

In today’s gospel lesson we find a story that was told and then retold again and again. It is one of a select few found in all four gospels. A woman bathes Jesus’ feet in expensive perfume, all the while crying tears of joy. Then, she dries Jesus’ feet with her hair.

In the first three gospels the woman is unnamed, but in St. John she is identified as Mary Magdalene. Some have implied that she may have been a “*sidewalk Cinderella*,” but this is not true. Mary is the sister of Martha and Lazarus whom Jesus has raised from the dead. Mary cries tears and pours perfume, not because she is a fallen woman, but because Jesus brought life back to her brother. Mary could not do enough to reverence Jesus.

Recall that Mary was the emotional one who wept with Jesus over Lazarus’ grave. It is Mary who sits at Jesus’ feet, both to honor and learn from him. She is the sensitive sister.

She certainly brings gender issues to the table, however. Her behavior is counter-cultural by drawing attention to herself. And touching a man in public is a social no-no. Its not like Jewish women never had any fun, but cultural mores forbid them ‘letting their hair down’ in public, and the consequences were not pleasant.

And talk about the **expensiveness** of the perfume. It is estimated that the price tag was equal to 83% of a year’s work! The perfume was a burial scent, and the amount probably means it was to be used for her entire family!

I find it interesting that it appears as if Mary is the only one who seems to 'get' Jesus' teaching. Mary's presence may have made the men culturally uncomfortable, but she has a personal epiphany. She knows, she understands, she 'gets it,' that Jesus needs to go to Jerusalem to suffer and die. And with this recognition, she prepares his body for burial. Jesus acknowledges this by quieting the others, because she is doing the right thing. This humble act of love is a foreshadowing of what Jesus will do on Maundy Thursday.

As usual, where there is a pleasant aroma, there is usually a fly in the ointment. One of the disciples, Judas, speaks critically about Mary. Judas, you may remember, is the bookkeeper for the Disciples. He draws attention to the outrageous cost of the perfume, when the money could have been spent on charitable work.

And you thought there was no irony in the Holy Scriptures! It's quite possible that Judas had his hand in the collective purse. Jesus gently admonishes Judas by sharing with him that the poor are always with us, and that there are always opportunities to serve them, but that he would only be with them a short while.

We cannot do for Jesus what Mary took the opportunity to do. However, we can obey what Jesus asked: "*Inasmuch as you have done this to the least of my brethren, you have done it to me.*" What does this really mean? When we love God excessively we are enabled to love other people extravagantly.

You and I do not have the opportunity to wash Jesus' feet with our tears, dry them with our hair (and I had my ponytail cut years ago!), or anoint him with costly perfume.

I realize that I often speak of our need to "*know God and ourselves,*" and there is a reason for this. Jesus said that, to those who have been forgiven much, much is required. When we understand, when we grasp that our lives overflow like Mary's perfume, forgiveness and love will spill from our lives into the people around us.

The opposite may be true too. If you or I do not believe that we are generously

forgiven all of the time, it is likely we do not forgive much. Without a thoroughly honest self-evaluation, I tend to think of my spiritual state as average, therefore I commit no really BAD sins. I tend to grade myself on a spiritual curve. After all, I don't have to be perfect, do I? But, that is NOT how God works. God grades by the cross, by pure grace.

The season of Lent is almost over. It has been a time to reflect on where we are spiritually, and where we want to be. It is an invitation to know and to grow. It is a challenge to move from the insignificant to the worthy. And, its not too late.

Is it possible that you and I may, like Mary, live lives of gratitude in response to all God has done and will do for us? Alleluia. Amen.