

“The Sweet Scent of Gratitude and Encouragement”

John 12:1-8

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I wonder what Mary had in mind for this expensive perfume. Was she keeping it for an emergency or to take care of her in her old age? It was, after all, worth over a year's wages, and could be sold for a handsome price.

Whatever she had in mind changed the evening Jesus and his disciples came to her home for dinner. As Jesus reclined at the table with her brother, Lazarus, Mary entered the room carrying this sweet smelling offering.

All of a sudden, she opened it and began pouring it on Jesus' feet. Perhaps everyone expected her to stop after a few seconds, but she did not. She poured every drop of it on his feet, filling the room with the sweet smell of friendship and the foul odor of criticism.

“Why wasn't this perfume sold, and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages!” Judas spouted for all to hear.

“Leave her alone,” Jesus quickly responded. “It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.”

I like stories filled with unexpected twists and turns, as this one has. It raises several questions we can ponder.

Why did Mary do this? Was it spontaneous or had she planned to do this ahead of time? Did someone tell her to do it, or was this strictly a personal decision?

Since Mary never speaks in this story, we don't know. It appears to me that no one prompted her. In all likelihood, no one knew she even had this perfume, except her immediately family.

I get the feeling this was a spontaneous expression of gratitude for a man she dearly loved. Days before this dinner, Jesus raised Mary's brother from the dead. Who wouldn't be overcome with gratitude and find a way to express it?

Beyond this, Jesus treated her with respect each time he came for a visit. He picked up on her eagerness to learn and taught her along with the disciples, unlike orthodox rabbis who considered teaching women a waste of time. She had to let him know how much this meant to her.

I feel there was another reason Mary anointed Jesus that evening. This was Mary's way of encouraging Jesus and lifting his spirit.

What did Jesus need that night above all else? He needed the support of his friends.

Coming to Passover that year was highly risky and dangerous. Ever since Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, the authorities had been looking for him. His popularity was growing, and people were listening to his message, which included a stinging indictment of the scribes and Pharisees.

He represented a severe threat to those in leadership. He exposed their hypocrisy and addictions to power, prestige, attention, control, money and their comfortable lifestyle. As a result, he had to be moved off the public stage, even if it meant crucifying him.

Jesus was aware of this and knew the days ahead were filled with risks and challenges. So, what did he need in order to face this struggle? He needed the support and encouragement of his closest friends, and Mary provided them in a way no one else did or was going to do.

She saw the worried look on his face and sensed the heavy burden he was bearing. This was not why she was content to pour just a portion of the perfume on his feet, but all of it. Her offering had to match his burden, and it did. The sweet scent of friendship had to overpower the stench of jealousy and betrayal.

What was the response from those gathered for this dinner? Judas openly criticized and humiliated her. However, no sooner had those stinging words left his greedy lips than Jesus came to her defense. Just as Mary had sensed his pain, Jesus sensed hers.

"Leave her alone," he said with a voice of authority. Jesus knew the difference between a sincere question, and one used to attack or embarrass people. There was nothing sincere about this one.

Why do you think John included this story in his account of Jesus' life? I am confident he wanted to set the stage for the crucifixion and help his readers understand why the authorities plotted to kill him, and Judas betrayed him.

Beyond this, he wanted to highlight the important role of women in Jesus' ministry. Throughout John's gospel, it was the women who embodied discipleship. This is certainly seen again in this passage through Mary's faithfulness, kindness and generosity.

I believe John wanted to promote the value of generosity, especially when expressing gratitude and demonstrating support for a troubled friend. Mary did not calculate to see how little she could pour on Jesus feet to express her love, but how much she could give to send a clear message to Jesus and her family.

I think John used this story to emphasize the importance of timing when making decisions. Decisions between two good choices are always agonizing. How do you break the stalemate and move forward? Ask what is needed most at the time, which for Mary was finding a way to express her love for Jesus and encouraging him to meet the challenges awaiting him. This opportunity would never come again; feeding the poor would.

Perhaps John had another motive for including this story. He wanted to teach his readers how painful, demoralizing, hurtful and crippling destructive criticism is. No doubt Judas' stinging rebuke stripped Mary of her self-esteem and pride. It made her second guess this decision and wonder if she had done a foolish thing. It had to make her feel all alone, wallowing in embarrassment.

John wanted his readers to speak up on behalf of innocent victims like Mary and become their advocate, as Jesus was for Mary. To be his disciple meant they could do no less. Their voices needed to be heard in their generation.

Who needs you to be a friend like Jesus was to Mary? Who needs you to stand with them when others have abandoned them? Who needs you to speak a word on their behalf while others remain silent? Who needs you to balance stinging criticism with hopeful words of encouragement?

Will you be this kind of a friend this week? The Lord will help you if you look to him for wisdom, compassion and courage.

On the other hand, who needs you to be a friend like Mary was to Jesus? Who needs to know their life matters to you and you appreciate them? Who is walking down a lonely road with a burdened heart and needs encouraging? Who is facing a stiff challenge this week and needs your support? What could you say or do to lift their spirit?

There is nothing like the sweet scent of gratitude and encouragement. It fills a heart with all that is good and wholesome and strengthens it for the long and winding road. Let Mary and Jesus inspire and motivate you this week to be this kind of friend.

