

Reciprocal Love

John 12:1-8

Grace Hills Baptist Church

April 7, 2019

It's interesting when you're in a gathering of people where many have the same name. In my home, our decision to name our son "Jonathan" has required some close reading of mail; my first name is also Jonathan, though our middle names are different. Just this week I picked up what I thought was my insurance card, but when I pulled it out of my wallet later, I realized it was his. Here at Grace Hills, we have a lot of folks with the same or similar names; we have three Nancys and two Dennises and a couple Janices. But William must have been incredibly popular in this area; at one point we had at least 5 Bills and a Will on the membership rolls. I wonder if we should have put all the Bills on a committee at some point, just for fun! Some names are just good, solid names, and thus are used by many people, even in the same community or congregation.

In the Gospels, we see this as well, nowhere more than with the name Mary. There are a lot of Marys in the story of Jesus. Have you ever noticed that? There's Mary his mother, of course – the epitome of faithfulness to God and devotion to Jesus her son. There's Mary

Magdalene, from whom Jesus cast seven demons and from whom we first hear the good news that Jesus has been raised. The crucifixion and resurrection stories of the Gospels tell us of Mary the mother of James, Mary the wife of Clopas, and a woman named Salome, who tradition holds is also Mary the mother of John Mark in the book of Acts. And here in our passage today, we meet one more: Mary of Bethany.

Unlike many of the people we meet in the Gospels, we come to this story knowing quite a bit about Mary of Bethany. We know that she had a sister named Martha and a brother named Lazarus. We know that they were followers of Jesus, and that Mary especially was devoted to learning the way of Christ. And we know that, more than just being followers, that Mary and her siblings were close friends of Jesus. When Lazarus died, we learn of Jesus' deep affection for this family, and then learn how he dropped everything to go and call Lazarus back from death. Before we even come to our passage today, then, we know that the connection between Jesus and Mary and her family is very, very strong.

The depth of that bond is shown in the opening verses of our passage today. As Jesus and his friends recline at table – the pattern for a meal together in ancient Judea – we are told that Mary took a pint of nard and anointed (or wiped it on) Jesus' feet. Nard originated from a plant

indigenous to India,¹ and was thus extremely expensive. In fact, as Judas points out later in the story, it was expensive to the point where a common laborer would have to work a year to purchase it. This extravagance leads Judas to comment on the cost of the perfume and suggest that a better way to use the funds expended in purchasing it would have been to provide for the poor. But Jesus rebukes him and honors Mary's devotion.

That's the story, in its barest bones. But the simplicity of the narrative conceals a deep truth that is central to the Gospel story John is trying to tell...and is incomplete without keeping the events of the next chapter in mind. Indeed, as professor Karoline Lewis reminds us, "the meaning of the anointing lies beyond the act itself."² It's a meaning that reveals itself as we read ahead in the story, for in John 13 it isn't Jesus whose feet are being cared for – it is him doing the caring. In chapter 12, Mary anoints Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair; in chapter 13 Jesus washes the disciples' feet and wipes them with his towel.

The connection between the two stories is reinforced by the words John chooses to use. In Greek, there are two words used to describe "anointing." One is the verb form from which we get the word "Christ,"

¹ Karoline Lewis, John, p. 165

² Lewis, 165

which means, “the Anointed One,” a word with a great deal of meaning to us. Yet it’s the other version that John uses in describing Mary’s act of devotion to Jesus, and it’s the same version that John uses to describe Jesus’ washing and wiping the disciples’ feet.³ As John crafted his Gospel carefully, being unusually attentive to the resonance of the words he chooses throughout his text, we can only determine that he meant these two events to be interpreted in light of one another – a determination reinforced by the proximity of these two stories in his narrative.⁴

What do we learn, then, in the light of this connection? That the Christian life, the following of Jesus that we are called to pursue, is built on relationship. Our connection with Jesus is not a one-way street, where we put a quarter in the vending machine, or in this case a prayer request in the divine telephone, and out pops a treat. It is a true relationship, and a relationship is marked by mutuality and reciprocity. Put another way, it takes two for a relationship to work. Acts of love and devotion go in each direction, because acts of love and devotion are how we respond to love shown to us in any relationship. And this type of relationship – the

³ Lewis, 165; Marianne Meye Thompson, John, NTL, 259-60

⁴ Lewis, 165

relationship between Jesus and Mary, between Jesus and all of us who are deeply committed to him – is like none other.

It is, above all, an abundant love, something John goes to great lengths to highlight in his Gospel and other writings. It is here, after all, that we get beloved images of heaven, where there is plenty of room for all of God's children. It is here in John that we find Jesus laying out how he has come to bring abundant life. It is here in John that we find the feeding of the 5000 in its most full retelling, here in John where Peter and the disciples are blessed with an overabundant amount of fish, and here in John where water is turned into wine, not just in a couple of bottles, but in a half dozen 20- to 30-gallon stone jars. If there is a word for the love of Jesus for the people around him in John's Gospel, that word is "abundant."

This abundant love is reciprocated by Mary, a true follower of Jesus. She is absurdly extravagant in her expression of love to her Lord. Whatever else might be done with a pint of pure nard, it doesn't take that much to cover someone's feet! That would be absurd! Yet to Mary, it made perfect sense to use the full amount on the feet of her Lord – enough so that the entire house was filled with the scent, enough so that it flowed off his feet instead of being absorbed, so that she had to wipe away the excess with her hair. This was no token of her devotion, no "portion" of the

gifts that God had bestowed upon her. This is over-the-top, abundant love reciprocated towards the One who had shown, and would show, over-the-top abundant love to her and to so many others. “Mary’s act foreshadows Jesus’ act, and his recalls hers.”⁵

These two encounters, then – the anointing of Jesus’ feet by Mary and the washing of the disciples’ feet by Jesus – demonstrate “the extraordinary reciprocity that is assumed between Jesus and the believer [and] between the believer and Jesus” in the Gospel of John.⁶ Yet not only does John share the example of the model to follow; he presents an alternative to avoid. Judas, who is presented with no ambiguity about his place in the story, raises an objection. “Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages.” Judas is a miser who has not a mystical bone in his body, and his comment is not on the face of it anything more than a pragmatist’s consternation at such extravagance on display.

Yet Judas is both something more than what he appears and something less than Mary herself. John tells us that Judas’ apparent concern isn’t driven by any actual concern for the poor; rather, he is a thief,

⁵ Lewis, 165

⁶ Lewis, 165

and he would skim some – perhaps even most – of any donations off the top for himself. Better, in his mind, for a year’s wages to be split between him and the poor than for it to be wasted underfoot, so to speak.

But more than this, Judas is the antithesis of Mary’s devotion to Christ. He may be one of the Twelve, but she’s the true disciple in the story. As Karoline Lewis reminds us:

“A first glance presents Judas as having a feigned concern about the amount of money seemingly wasted by Mary’s act. Judas is a thief, we discover. Yet this information about Judas as a thief has little, if anything, to do with money or with his reputation as a petty penny-pincher. He is a nonbeliever, whereas Mary is a believer. Mary believes in Jesus, and to believe in Jesus means to be in a relationship with Jesus. With the anointing, Mary demonstrates her love and how much her relationship with Jesus means. She acts out the essential premise of reciprocity in relationship. Judas reveals how distant he is from Jesus even though he [is] one of Jesus’ disciples.”⁷

What, when it comes down to it, is the difference between Mary and Judas? Mary believes in the abundance of Jesus and reciprocates abundantly; Judas believes God’s love is scarce. Because of that, he doesn’t see any need to give God anything more than the bare minimum and hoard the rest for himself. His love for God and Jesus – and there

⁷ Lewis, 166

must have been some, else he would never have followed in the first place – his love is stunted and self-centered. Judas has been with Jesus for years at this point, and yet his response to the love of God through Christ is all transactional. He receives it and responds with scarcity and greed.

He didn't have to. Judas could have been more like Mary: allowing himself to experience the abundant love of Christ and responding with the same generosity of love and life. Judas would be there to receive the care of Jesus as he stooped to wash his feet, and he would be there to eat the meal of abundance. Yet when the moment came, when John tells us the devil entered into Judas and he at last made the choice to betray his Teacher, there was little apparent struggle. Why? Because Judas had chosen to see Jesus as a means to an end, and when that means no longer served the end, he cast him aside. That's the love of Judas, the type of devotion he had chosen. How different from the devotion of Mary, who received the abundant love of Christ and responded with all she had! How different from the response that led to sacrificial giving and over-the-top action! How different a place they ended up when they didn't have to!

Which path do we choose? Are we more like Mary, or more like Judas? Do we respond to the love of God with joyful generosity, giving above and beyond of our time, our effort, our money, and our allegiance?

Or do we hoard the gifts of God for ourselves, doling out compassion, forgiveness, material gain and personal effort at the lowest acceptable level, returning only a “portion” of what has been given us?

We know which path Jesus invites us to walk – the path of abundant life and abundant love – and what a path that is! We are invited to be in a reciprocal relationship with the Lord of the universe, who gave absolutely everything out of his love for us. Receiving such tremendous abundant love, can we respond with anything less than our all? Can we truly turn our backs on Jesus, giving him the crumbs of our devotion?

Like Mary and Judas, we have that choice – to be followers of Jesus who reciprocate his abundant love, or to be miserly associates who seek the least costly way to still be in the kingdom of God. Either way, Jesus will love us – Judas, after all, still had his feet washed by his Lord. But only one way will bring real joy to the One who has given so much for us. Only one way will be true to the great devotion that God calls forth from our hearts. Only one way will be the path of actual abundant life.

May we be a people known for our generous love and life-giving compassion. May we be a church known for living the abundant life in the light of Christ’s love. And may we be followers of Jesus who go all-out for our Lord, reciprocating the love of our God in all that we do. Amen.