

## From Perfume to Potshots: The Sweet Scent and Stench of Devotion

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Based upon John 12:1-8; Gal. 6:1-10

The dinner party was to celebrate the unimaginable: Lazarus was alive. Although Lazarus had been buried in a tomb for four days, Jesus had come and called him out, and there he was sitting now beside his best friend as if nothing had ever happened. Martha, Lazarus' sister, was most likely bustling around trying to get everything just right for the meal. Mary, Lazarus' other sister, had something other than table settings and stew on her mind. Overcome with gratitude to Jesus for bringing her brother back to them, Mary came over to where he and Jesus were reclining for the supper. She took a jar of pure nard, perhaps one that she had purchased to anoint her brother in death only a few days before, and she poured it all over Jesus' feet. The room was instantly filled with the strong scent of spikenard, a perfume associated with emperors,<sup>1</sup> and a scent also associated with death. It was an extravagant gesture given the cost of the perfume, and a prophetic one too given what would happen to Jesus soon. But how does one say thank you for bringing someone back from the dead? Mary, who was already known for her devotion to Jesus, knew of no better way. Jesus, recognizing this, received her gift with pleasure.

As we heard, not everyone was delighted by her behavior that evening, however. In *Matthew* and *Mark's* gospels, the disciples as a whole complain about the extravagant cost of this almost sacramental anointing, which affirmed Jesus' kingship, foreshadowed his death, and also foreshadowed the meal at which Jesus would call his disciples to servanthood by tending to the feet of those he loved much like Mary. But in *John*, the only one who objects to Mary's gift and proclamation is Judas Iscariot. "The perfume cost 300 denarii, the equivalent of a year's wages. Why wasn't the money spent on the poor?" he asks.

Now it's pretty clear that if anyone other than Judas had made this objection, we would find it to be reasonable. To spend so much money on something only to dump it on someone's feet doesn't exactly seem like good Christian stewardship. This is especially true when you consider that in *John's* gospel – which awkwardly splices *Luke's* story about a sinful woman wiping her tears off Jesus' feet with her hair, with *Matthew's* story of a faithful woman anointing Jesus' feet with perfume – Mary pours the perfume onto Jesus' feet, and then promptly wipes it off again with her hair. What was the point of that gesture? Wouldn't it have been better to spend the money on food for the poor? If we were all on Session working on a budget for our limited resources, I don't think any of us would be fighting to devote a year's worth of income to a five-minute act of devotion in worship, instead of helping those in need.

It's also pretty clear from the text, that even though we all know this, *John* doesn't want us to give any credence to this argument. That's why he makes Judas be the one to express it instead of the other disciples, and that's why he also he takes pains through two unnecessary

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<sup>1</sup> Apparently Antiochus Epiphanes liked to pour it on himself in the public baths. See Bruns, J. Edgar, "A Note on *Jn. 12, 3*", THE CATHOLIC BIBLICAL QUARTERLY, Vol. 28, 1966, at 221.

parenthetical statements to disparage Judas, first as Jesus' betrayer, and second as a greedy thief and embezzler. By the time John was writing his gospel, Judas had gone from being seen by the Church as an instrument of God, used to make God's plans to redeem humanity come true, to an instrument of the Devil, who tried to thwart God's plans because he was evil. So, John had nothing favorable to say about him. This story was a good opportunity for him to demonize him while celebrating Mary's devotion and spiritual insight, all in a neat transitional scene which bridges Lazarus' raising and Jesus' own Passion.

But today I don't want us to focus on either how horrible Judas was, based on an ancient smear campaign, or how reasonable Judas was, based upon our idea of fiscal stewardship. I don't want us to celebrate Mary at Judas' expense either. This text isn't really about choosing between prophetic devotion and poverty relief; it's about choosing to devote ourselves to Christ. So I want to invite us all to focus our attention today on the part of Judas that lurks inside each of us, not the betrayer or the treasurer, but the part that feels that when it comes to being faithful to Jesus, there is one right way, or one best way to convey our love of God. "Wouldn't it be better..." Judas said, interrupting a sacred and sad moment of extravagant devotion to demonstrate his own wisdom. "Isn't it more faithful to..." he asked, with the self-assurance of someone who believed he was clearly right and that Mary was clearly wrong, and wanted to make sure everyone knew it. That blind-eyed, self-confidence would ultimately lead Judas to betray Jesus, when Jesus didn't behave in the way that Judas thought he should. But at this moment in the story, all his comment did was add the unpleasant stench of self-righteousness to a room already too fragrant with the scent of death.

Judas presented Jesus with an "either-or" scenario for acceptable devotion, and we often do too, either consciously or unconsciously. We become so convinced that our way of serving God is the best way, that we cannot even conceive that another way could be equally valid. But there are actually lots of ways to connect with and serve Christ, as Jack Haberer, a Presbyterian pastor and longtime editor of *Presbyterian Outlook* magazine, discovered when the Judas in him was forced to get to know the Mary in others. During the difficult years when our denomination was divided over gay rights issues, Haberer was convinced that he knew what the Bible had to say on the subject. So, when he was called upon by the Stated Clerk of the denomination to participate in a study group of people from across the denomination designed to promote greater understanding and reconciliation, he said "Sure." He walked into the room filled with self-righteousness, expecting to meet the devil in his opponents, or at least to confirm that they didn't care about the Bible as much as he did. But after months of spending time with a diverse cross-section of the denomination, he discovered that everyone cared about the Bible and faithfulness. Everyone was passionately devoted to God in Christ. Their disagreements came, not from lack of faith, but from the passionate intensity of their devotion to Christ, which they felt called to express in different ways.

Drawing on his experience, Haberer wrote a book which identifies five different approaches to Christian devotion that he calls "GodViews."<sup>2</sup> Like the Myers-Briggs personality

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<sup>2</sup> Haberer, Jack, *GodViews: The Convictions That Drive Us and Divide Us* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2001).

profiles so many of us are familiar with from work, GodViews are spiritual personality profiles which reflect people's preferences and inclinations, born out of both their temperaments and their experiences. There isn't a right GodView or a wrong one. That was the lesson that Haberer learned the hard way. All of the GodViews are valid, and all are necessary in order for the Church to be faithful to Christ.

The first GodView is called "the Confessionalist" view. People with this spiritual inclination are committed to discerning, proclaiming, and preserving the truth. Devotion for them is about protecting Church doctrine from corrupting influences of the world, and preserving the traditions our spiritual ancestors cherished. "Devotionalists," in contrast, are less concerned with doctrine, and more concerned with connection. People with a Devotionalist GodView are hungry to experience God. They love to pray and worship, meditate and commune with God. I suspect Mary probably fell in this group. A third GodView is the "Ecclesiast" view. People in this group are the backbone of the church, expressing their devotion to Christ by serving on committees, teaching classes, singing in the choir, giving generously. Martha might have been an Ecclesiast if the Church had existed in her day. The fourth GodView is the "Altruist" view. Altruist Christians see human tragedies that others overlook and are committed to doing something about them. Mission is the ultimate Christian devotion for these people; it is the essence of the Gospel. Judas' comment about the need to care for the poor was an altruist-kind of comment. The last GodView is the "Activist" view. Activists feel compelled to challenge systemic evil and injustice. They are advocates, demonstrators, and political activists. To love God for them, is to work to change the way things are in the world, to the way God would have them be. All of these GodViews affect how we read and understand Scripture, and all of them shape how we serve God.<sup>3</sup>

Think about which of these views you resonate with most, knowing that it's OK if you feel drawn to more than one. Do you find your greatest joy as a disciple connecting with God through Bible study and prayer, or through service or advocacy? Do you feel the threat of the secular world on the Gospel acutely, or the call to build up the Church urgently? Haberer argues that most of us are inclined to one or two forms of Christian discipleship more than the others, and that's where the problems arise. When the Confessionalists feel that the Altruists are putting serving people over sound theology, or when the Activists want to get out and protest, but Devotionalists just want to sit quietly and commune with the Spirit, or when Ecclesiasts feel like they are the only ones carrying the weight of the church for everyone, it's easy for people to end up feeling frustrated or threatened. Our differences in devotional style lead to budget battles, denominational civil wars, and the perception from those outside the church that Christians are more holier-than-thou, than holy.

But consider today's lesson. Although Jesus appreciated all that Mary's gift conveyed, he didn't actually pick Mary's form of devotion over Judas' for always. He picked it as appropriate for that moment, while still affirming Judas' spoken passion for the poor. Mary's actions were appropriate because she was preparing Jesus' body for burial out of her love and gratitude for him. Judas' suggestion that it's good to give to the poor was also appropriate because as

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 39-40.

*Deuteronomy* affirms, there will always be those in need; therefore, it is always our responsibility to help them. For Jesus, devoted discipleship isn't about one way; it's about timing and the heart of the person serving. There are times to help and times to contemplate, times to pray and times to protest. But at all times, our discipleship is only appropriate if we are devoted to God more than our own egos and fears. If we claim we are devoted, but then attack our sisters and brothers in faith for their devotion, then all we do is demonstrate that we aren't truly as devoted to Jesus as we claim to be.

“Take care that you are not tempted,” Paul advised the Christians in Galatia, who were spending too much time telling each other they were doing discipleship wrong. “All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. For all must carry their own loads.... Whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.” (Gal. 6:1b, 4, 10). In the Galatian churches, the Confessionalists wanted to preserve the Jewish legal requirement of circumcision, while the Devotionalists and Ecclesiasts wanted to connect as many with God as easily as possible.

In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), our Constitution identifies six “Great Ends” for the Church. They are: 1) the proclamation of the Gospel; 2) the shelter, nurture, spiritual fellowship of the children of God; 3) the maintenance of divine worship; 4) the preservation of the Truth who is Jesus Christ; 5) the proclamation of social righteousness; and 6) the exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world.<sup>4</sup> Notice how all of the GodViews fit nicely into this list? In order to accomplish all six Great Ends, we need people who love worship and truth, service and nurture, proclamation and demonstration, and more. We need all of us to serve the Lord with devotion and to be a faithful Church. So, let us rejoice when we discover sitting next to us in the sanctuary someone who is passionate about Christ in a different way from ourselves, and let us hold our tongues when someone gives to Christ and through Christ in a way we wouldn't give. We are all invited to the supper which celebrates Jesus' death and resurrection, and all called by him to be servants of others in his name. Thanks be to God! Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> F-1.0304, THE CONSTITUTION OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA), PART II BOOK OF ORDER (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2017-19).