

Prudence or Passion?

David A. Baer

*Fifth Sunday in Lent (C)
April 3, 2022*

Text: John 12:1-8

It started as an ordinary dinner among friends, or maybe not so ordinary. There's nothing ordinary about a dinner with a friend who raised you, raised your brother from the dead. Jesus is dining at the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, who are brother and sisters. He has a special relationship with this family. Not too long ago, when Jesus was out on tour, Lazarus had fallen sick and died. But Jesus came and called out to him, and he came out of the tomb dressed in burial wrappings. What do you do for the man who gave you life again? What do you do for the man who gave you your brother back? How do you show your indescribable love and thanks?

The house this night is filled with warmth and love. Martha, always the busy doer, makes dinner. She pours love into her cooking, bringing hot and savory food out to Jesus. Lazarus himself sits down with Jesus, offering the hospitality of company and conversation. Judas sees all of this, and finds nothing objectionable. This is what friends do, especially friends for whom Jesus has done so much.

Mary's gift of love is in a different league, though. She brings out an expensive perfume—it's value is three hundred times the average daily wage. It would take you a year's worth of steady work to save up for one of these—and that's if you didn't need anything else like food or clothing. She kneels down at Jesus' feet and pours out the fragrant ointment on them, and she wipes them dry with her hair. The scent fills the whole house.

This is over-the-top. It's excessive. It's—I don't know, maybe even a little risqué? Judas is perplexed and angry. "Rabbi, what a waste! Do you know the price this perfume would have brought? Think of how many people could have been fed or clothed." I don't think we should take the comment about him being a thief too seriously—when there's a villain in a story that gets told and retold, the villain tends to get more and more villainous, and by the time this story got written down people had had 70 years or so to reflect on what a bad guy Judas was. But more importantly, whether he's being honest about it or not, Judas is giving voice to a feeling that others may have about Mary's extravagance.

Before we talk about that, though, let's remember that in John's gospel, nothing is what it seems on the surface. The events of Jesus' life are drenched in symbolic meaning. For example, after he feeds the crowd with loaves and fishes, he tells his disciples that the real meaning of the miracle is that he is the bread of that has come down from heaven, and his followers must feed on him, on Jesus if they are to have life. This story is all about the symbolism too. We can see what it means if we let Jesus' words guide us: "Leave her alone," he tells Judas. "She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial."

Mary is anointing Jesus because he is the Messiah, the Christ, the anointed one, the rightful king and ruler of God's people. In the other gospels, Simon Peter is the one to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, but then he immediately screws up. Peter just can't

believe that being the Messiah means suffering and dying on the cross. But Mary gets it right. She's not anointing his head, but his feet. And as she pours out her expensive perfume on those feet, she is preparing his body for the violence and death to come. Her costly gift to Jesus is a quiet echo of the costly gift Jesus is about to give to us all.

But let's imagine for a moment that Jesus decided to lead his own life according to Judas's understanding. Judas is prudent. He takes stock of the resources he has. He wants to use them in the most cost-effective way. He wants to apply them in the service of proven solutions. So let's take stock of Jesus himself, then. He is the Son of God. He has immense wisdom, and he can perform incredible miracles of feeding and healing. What a waste for him to provoke the Jewish and Roman leaders! What a waste for him to die on the cross! Just as the perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor, Jesus could have spent the rest of his earthly life teaching and doing good. Think of how many people he could have helped, how many lives he could have changed for the better!

But that's not what Jesus did. What we remember is not Jesus' prudence. What we remember is his passion, in all the multiple meanings of that word. Jesus had a passion for God. He loved God deeply, fully, and perfectly, so that God's presence and power became real wherever he taught and healed. He also had a passion for God's people, for us. He loved us with the deep love of a shepherd who goes after the stray sheep. And these passions came together on the cross. Jesus' calling is to be the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Jesus' passion, his suffering, became a costly gift of his life poured out to reconcile us to God and to each other. That's costly love. That's passion.

And that's the passion that inspires Mary to pour out her expensive perfume on his feet, with a reckless passion of her own. Her calling in this moment is to be a prophet who points toward what Jesus is about to do for them all. As for Judas, he objected, as the story says, not because he cared about the poor—and Jesus put him in his place. You don't mess with someone else's calling, someone else's God-given passion. You don't try to redirect it to some other "useful" activity that you yourself don't even believe in.

Jesus had a vocation, a calling. Mary had a calling. Every one of us has a calling, a God-inspired purpose for your life. And it could be a something permanent, like a job—you might have a vocation as a teacher or a doctor. But your job doesn't have to be your calling. You might have a vocation as an artist and have to make your living in some other way. God might call you to be an extra caring friend that everyone at your church turns to. God might call you to be a foster parent. The author Frederick Buechner writes that "the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."¹ Your calling is the place where your passion intersects with God's passion, with Christ's passion for a lost and hurting world. It's where our most costly gift, our own lives, are poured out generously and unreservedly and passionately for the world God loves.

I used to think that a calling was something you figured out, hopefully when you were young, and then you never had to think about it again. But then I met someone who moved overseas because of a spouse's job transfer and struggled to find meaning and purpose in a strange place. I met an older adult who had been given the gift of more time after surgery and wondered why God had offered these extra years. This question of calling is one that keeps asking itself, even as life moves on and circumstances change. And the temptation is to side with the logic voiced by Judas in this story, to be prudent and sensible with our gifts, to fend off the passionate voice that

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*.

invites us to embrace our deep gladness where it meets the world's deep need.

"You always have the poor with you," Jesus said. By that he didn't mean that the needs of the poor were unimportant, or that it was hopeless to try and care for them. In fact, he was making reference to a verse from Deuteronomy (15:11) that tells the people to be sure something is always set aside something for the poor. The duty to care for the poor and vulnerable is universal, just as the duty to treat one another as we want to be treated is common to all Christians. "But," Jesus said, "you do not always have me." Each of us has our own passion, the place where Christ intrudes into each of our lives, the calling that will feed the deep gladness of our hearts and connect us with the God who passionately and unreservedly poured out costly love for us. Care for the poor, care for our own families—these are universal obligations we all share. They're always there, and I can't hide behind them to deny the unique claims of God on my life.

What deep gladness has God been calling you to embrace? Where have you been resisting the pull of Christ's passion? Or are you still waiting to hear that invitation? Jesus poured out his life in a costly gift of healing love, to give us not just life, but *abundant* life, a life worth living, a life filled with gladness and passion. If it will take prayer and listening for you to hear his invitation to you, then do that. If you know what it is you are being asked to do, then don't wait! The love straining to get loose, to break free, is God's love. God loves us with a love that is not calculated, not prudent, but passionate and unreserved, that will bear any burden to make us whole. And God invites us to enter into God's own passion, remaking and binding up the world. Amen.