

April 3rd, 2022

John 12:1-8 “You’re In My Bubble”

I’m conflicted. Well, I should back up. At the beginning of the week I was conflicted. See, the story of the woman who anointed Jesus is a story that appears in all four gospels. We’ve been in Luke’s gospel for all of Lenten season, but this week, the lectionary gave us John’s version of the story. My issue is that Luke has a more detailed account of the story while John’s is very short and is set in a different time and place. So at the beginning of the week I told Briony, “I’ve been preaching from Luke all season, and I’ll be preaching from Luke again for Palm Sunday! I’m not going to preach from John just because the lectionary editors say so! They aren’t the boss of me! I defy their illogical choice! Let it be known that I, Jesse Kearns, pastor of First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the beautiful city of Chico, California disregard the editors of the New Common Lectionary and declare that Luke 7:36-50 will be this week’s *official* version of the woman who anointed Jesus!” But the more I read Luke’s version and started comparing it to John’s, the more I thought, “You know, these lectionary editors really know what they’re doing.” Luke’s version of this story takes place way back near the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. But the other three gospel writers place this story right before Jesus enters Jerusalem for the last time, which we call Palm Sunday and which is what we’ll be celebrating next week. And of the three other gospels that give us the story of the woman who anointed Jesus, John’s is by far the best. This is why I’m a preacher and not a lectionary editor.

For the last few weeks, we’ve been talking about parables that Jesus told and how absurd they sounded to his listeners because they broke so many social norms. This week we’ve got a story that’s *not* a parable. This is an account of Jesus’ actions. Instead of hearing about how the *characters* in his parables broke social norms to make a point, we get to see how *Jesus* broke social norms to make his point. And there were a lot of them. But before we get into that, we need to be clear about who Mary and Martha were. This Mary isn’t Jesus’ mother. It was a

common name as was Judas, John, Simon and a number of other people we read about in scripture. Martha was Mary's older sister, and there's a great story about how Jesus once visited Martha's house and while Martha was "distracted with much serving," Mary was sitting at Jesus' feet listening to his teaching. When Martha complained that Mary wasn't being a good servant, Jesus told Martha to stop worrying about being a good servant and follow her sister's example instead.

In today's story, Jesus is at the home of Lazarus who he recently raised from the dead. Martha is serving dinner which is no surprise because she's a Martha. It's unfortunate how nowadays we use names to describe a person's role or personality. We use the name "Karen" to describe privileged women who "want to talk to the manager" when they don't get their way. That's unfair to women whose real names are Karen. In the church, we use the name "Martha" to describe women who are always working hard to get things done but give the stink-eye to women who they don't think are helping enough. That's because in the Bible, Martha is the role model for servanthood and busywork. And that's what's happening here. While Martha is serving dinner, Mary comes along and starts doing things that were jaw-droppingly inappropriate for this culture.

For starters, she brings in a pound of nard, which is a huge amount of a very expensive perfume that was likely imported from India. Then she entered into Jesus' personal space which is a boundary issue that still exists today. I managed a camp in Virginia where I would often teach boundaries training for the counselors and directors. We talked about what to do when you ran into a camper who was a cling-on. Not a Star Trek Klingon, but a clingy kid who was always getting into your personal space. I said, "Think of your personal space as a bubble. Some people's bubbles are bigger and some are smaller. There will be times when you've just got to tell your clingy campers, 'excuse me, you're in my bubble.'" Well my kids picked up on this because they'd be playing in another room and we'd hear, "Stop! You're in my bubble." Pretty soon, they'd come to us and say, "Tell him to stay out of my bubble!"

In the first century in Judah there was definitely a bubble that rabbis like Jesus had that common people were not supposed to cross. What made matters worse in *this* situation was that Mary was a woman. But she didn't stop there. Jewish women were not allowed to let their hair down in public, especially not in the presence of a rabbi. Then she anointed his feet with this expensive perfume and wiped his feet with her hair. She put so much of this nard on his feet that the whole house was filled with the aroma of the perfume. And here's the clincher: Jesus allowed this. If Jesus told a *parable* about a woman who anointed a rabbi's feet with expensive imported perfume and wiped it up with her hair, people would have said, "No way. No way in the world would this happen." But this wasn't a parable. This was Jesus *letting* it happen to him.

The first person to object to this wasn't a Scribe or a religious leader. It wasn't Mary or Lazarus. It was Judas, one of Jesus' inner circle of 12 disciples. Did he object because Mary was in Jesus' bubble being recklessly inappropriate? Did he object because Jesus was allowing this? No. Judas was upset because Mary was being way too extravagant and wasteful by using such expensive perfume. Judas said, "Why was this perfume not sold for 300 denarii and given to the poor?" I love how the writer immediately says, "He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it." Thank you, John, for reminding us that Judas was the bad guy. We get it. Then Jesus responded to Judas with the most misquoted and misinterpreted verse in the Bible – "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. *You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.*"

I think subconsciously this is the other reason why I wanted to use Luke's version of the story. People hate it when preachers challenge folks' interpretation of single, out-of-context Bible verses that can be used to justify very un-Jesus-like behavior. Maybe a part of me was thinking, "I don't want to let that monster out of the cage two weeks before Easter." But it's Lent. And Lent isn't a time for comfortable

passages that make us feel all warm and fuzzy inside. Lent is a time of challenge and temptation. It's a time where we have to ask ourselves, "Am I really willing to follow Jesus all the way to the cross? Can't I just hang out with him at the sermon on the mount?" No. Not during Lent.

Judas does something here that we are often guilty of when we encounter people we don't like who are in need. And you might say, "Yeah, but I totally get what Judas is saying here. Why be wasteful when there's need? It sounds like he wants to help the poor and just can't understand why Jesus is letting this expensive perfume go to waste. Especially when there are people in need who could benefit from the money you'd make by selling it." But remember, John goes out of his way to say, "Don't forget Judas is the greedy, awful bad guy who ends up betraying Jesus." He really doesn't care about the poor. What Judas is doing here is practicing "whataboutism." This is a debate tactic that's used to distract people from the issue on the table. Most people who practice whataboutism aren't really interested in whatever they introduce to an argument. They just say they are to deflect from the real issue at hand. For example - someone will say, "Hey, we're having a fund raiser to help refugees." Then someone else will say, "Yeah, but what about homeless people in our cities?" Quite often those who engage in whataboutism are not interested in honest dialogue and sometimes they're not even interested in the people or cause that they're trying to bring attention to. They're just trying to deflect. What Judas is trying to deflect here isn't the wasteful use of resources, it's this incredibly intimate model of servanthood and discipleship that Mary is demonstrating. What Mary is doing here is exactly what Jesus will do a week later in the upper room when he shares a meal with his disciples and washes their feet. Throughout scripture we see that Mary is someone who gets it. Even more than the twelve. Her act of service is rooted in her devotion to Jesus. Jesus' act of service to his disciples is rooted in his devotion to both the disciples and *all* of humankind. And to this day this act serves as a weekly symbol of the communion that we have with Jesus and with each other.

But that's not the end. We can't leave until we address the last thing Jesus said to Judas. "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." I can't tell you how many people say, "See, this is the reason we shouldn't spend so much time and resources helping the poor. They're never going to go away, so you might as well direct your resources to someone who deserves it. Jesus said it right here on page 875 that spending time with him takes priority over helping the poor." What we forget, though, is that Jesus was using a phrase from the Law of Moses - Deuteronomy 15:11 to be specific. But let's go back to verse 7 -

"If there is among you *anyone* in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, 'The seventh year, the year of remission, is near', and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt. Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. **[And here's verse 11]** - Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'

By borrowing the words of verse 11 from this passage in the Law of Moses, Jesus is not saying, "Don't worry about the poor because they'll always be with you," he's saying, "This act of love that Mary has done for me? That's what *you* need to do for the poor because *I* will not always be with you. But the poor *will* always be with you so do as she has done. Show this incredible extravagant act of love in the way you care for the poor because you all are the ones who will be carrying out my mission after I'm gone." May the grace and mercy that you show

toward others in their time of need be the same grace and mercy shown to you in your time of need. Amen.