

"How Inappropriate!"

John 12:1-8

Crossroads Christian Church

Psalms 126

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They say that "Location, location, location" are the three keys to selling real estate. When it comes to understanding a Bible story, the three keys often are, "Context, context, context." What comes before the story? What comes after the story? How does the story tie in with the author's main themes or agendas?

To help understand the real drama of this story, why Mary did what she did, and how people reacted, and especially how Jesus reacted, you need to know the context.

Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were friends of Jesus, John tells us. They lived in a suburb of Jerusalem called Bethany. Their home must have been a place where Jesus and the disciples always felt welcome. Think about some of your best friends, BFFs, as they're called, and what makes your relationship with them special; what makes you close. That's how Jesus, Mary and Martha were. When Lazarus fell seriously ill, they sent messengers to tell Jesus, but Jesus didn't rush to their house. He bided his time. By the time Jesus and the disciples reached Bethany, Lazarus had already died, been buried, and left in the tomb. As Jesus approached, first Martha, and then Mary, came out to meet him. They both gently chided Jesus for not hurrying, and doing something to save their brother. They knew that he had the power. "Yet even now" they trusted him. When Jesus asked Martha if she believed in the resurrection, she said, sure, she believed in the resurrection that would come at the end of time. But Jesus said, I Am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, though they die, will live. Do you believe this?" And Martha confessed her faith—"Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." Although we usually use Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ as our standard when we receive someone into the church, Martha's confession is really important, too. Jesus walked to the tomb, prayed, and asked for the stone to be moved away. "But Lord, it's been three days. He'll stink." Then Jesus called for Lazarus to come out. Delmer Chilton describes it like this. "And Lazarus came out, bound up like a Mummy in a bad horror movie; stumbling and smelly but alive." Quite an amazing story, huh?

In John's Gospel, the story of raising Lazarus from the dead is crucial—John says that it is the tipping point that lifted Jesus from being seen as a nuisance to being a major threat by those who opposed him. The religious authorities and the political authorities were afraid that if Jesus had that much power, he could cause political unrest and instability; that the crowds

might follow him and start a rebellion. Here's what it says in John 11:-48. "Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." And Caiaphas said that it is better for one man to die than the whole nation—and the lot was cast. Jesus was now one who had to be sacrificed to protect the status quo.

So that's the context of our Gospel lesson for today. Jesus had performed maybe the most spectacular miracle of his career and was now on the hit list. But now we go from politics back to friendship. It was, maybe, a few weeks after Lazarus was raised. Now, Martha, Mary, and Lazarus were hosting Jesus and the disciples for dinner. In the middle of it, Mary, the impulsive, emotional, intuitive one, does a strange thing. She pours expensive ointment on Jesus' feet, lets down her hair, and wipes his feet with her hair. The ointment—nard—was so expensive that a container of it may have been worth a year's wages for the average citizen. It was imported all the way from the Himalayas by camel caravan. It was a luxury, too much for most households to have even a tiny amount. Now here was a woman pouring it on Jesus feet, unbinding her hair, which was something nice, respectable women wouldn't do in public, and wiping Jesus' feet—again, this kind of physical contact between an unmarried man and an unmarried woman would be seen as highly inappropriate, if not scandalous!

Propriety would say, "Highly inappropriate!"

Dignity would say, "You're disrupting things!"

Modesty would say, "You're embarrassing everybody!"

Responsibility would say, "You're being wasteful."

But Jesus would say, though not exactly in these words, "You care enough about me that you are showing your love in a unique and beautiful way. The world will always remember this expression of love."

In that day, anointing had some special meanings. One could be anointed for a task or role in society—set apart like a priest or ruler. It was a sign of being consecrated by God. When we say Jesus Christ, we're making a faith statement that Jesus is the anointed one—the Christ—the Messiah—commissioned by God to save the world. Another time anointing was practiced was in the preparation of a dead body for burial. So Jesus saw in Mary's act of love and devotion two things—she was proclaiming Jesus as the Christ, God's anointed one. But she was also preparing his body for the burial it would soon receive.

Barbara Brown Taylor, one of my favorite preachers, said that what Jesus' friend Mary did was a prophetic act. Prophets of old often used actions to dramatize their messages. Ezekiel had buried a clean new garment and dug it up months later, to show that it was rotting like his nation was rotting. Jeremiah had worn an ox yoke around the streets of Jerusalem to dramatize that Israel would come under the yoke of another country. Isaiah had walked around town naked to make the same point.

Here's what Barbara Brown Taylor says: "Whatever Mary thought about what she did, and whatever anyone else in the room thought about it, Jesus took it as a message from God--not the hysteric ministrations of an old maid gone sweetly mad but the carefully performed act of a prophet. Everything around Mary smacked of significance--Judas, the betrayer, challenging her act; the flask of nard--wasn't it left over from Lazarus' funeral?--and out in the yard, a freshly vacated tomb that still smelled of burial spices, waiting for a new occupant. The air was dense with death, and while there may at first have been some doubt about

When Mary stood before Jesus with that pound of pure nard in her hand, it could have gone either way. She could have anointed his head and everyone there could have proclaimed him a king. But she did not do that. When she moved toward him, she dropped to her knees instead and poured the perfume on his feet, which could only mean one thing. The only man who got his feet anointed was a dead man, and Jesus knew it. "Leave her alone," he said to those who would have prevented her. *Let her finish delivering the message.*¹ (unquote)

How inappropriate, must have been the reaction of some who witnessed this anointing. On the surface, it must have seemed so. But Jesus knew better. How utterly appropriate. Mary, the intuitive one, a woman who had prepared her own brother's body for burial, knew, just as Jesus knew, what was coming. Her prophetic action wasn't just to show people what was going to happen to Jesus. She gave a great sacrifice that would preshadow the greater sacrifice that Jesus was to make, as an act of love.

Let me close with a poem by Timothy Haut,

MARY'S HAIR

Her sister,
Laying plates in their places
And straightening the napkins once more
Did not notice at first--
Nor did her brother,
Still wide-eyed, fresh from the tomb,

¹ can't find source

Sipping wine
That had never tasted so sweet.
They did not notice
As Mary
Stepped through the door
Letting down her long, black hair,
Shaking it free
For her a tender, holy oblation.
She had seen the road-weary feet,
Noticed the scars, the scratches,
And knelt, lifting the heel in her palm,
Spilling precious oil,
Spilling her heart,
Spilling love itself
Until its fragrance filled the room.
Her eyes filled with tears.
As somewhere outside,
A dog barked,
And a hammer rang against wood.²

Amen.

by Michael E Dixon

² Timothy Haut, quoted from Midrash.com.