

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“The Heart of the Matter: What to Do With What You Have ”  
Rev. Amy Morgan  
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Isaiah 43:16-21, John 12:1-8

She sat with him in the darkest hours of the night. As his breathing became more labored, as doctors and nurses checked his vital signs, she kept her hand on his shoulder and talked about sports. She wanted him to know he was not alone.

She had never met the man who lay dying in the hospital bed beside her. She volunteered to relieve family members of those who were dying in the hospital and to sit with those who had no family members to be with them in their last days. Perhaps she did not slather their feet with precious perfume, but she gave them the valuable gift of her time and her presence. She could have prioritized her time differently. She could have volunteered to work with the living – serving food at a homeless shelter or tutoring underprivileged schoolchildren. Why waste her time with people who were dying?

This is the kind of opinionated question posed to Mary as she kneels at the feet of Jesus, her hair an oily mess of perfume mixed with dirt. Now, Judas, we are told, had his own hidden agenda buried in his query. But it’s a legitimate question, nonetheless. Why waste an ointment costing a year’s worth of wages in such an extravagant gesture?

Like Judas, we all have opinions about what others should do with what they have. Whether it is time, money, or talent, one person’s waste is another’s wealth. And, like Judas, these viewpoints we have are shaped by our own motivations and priorities. They are windows into our hearts.

Do we operate out of scarcity or abundance? Are we motivated by greed or compassion? Do we have a big picture mindset, or are we caught up in the minutia? Are we fretting about the future, regretting the past, or living fully in the present?

Most of us are a complicated combination of all of these things, but at any given moment, our views about the allocation of resources comes out of this web of motives. And, like Judas, they can keep us from recognizing the true value of what is right in front of us.

Judas is as complicated a person as ever there was. He felt called to follow Jesus, to learn from him, carry his message out to others. Somewhere along the way, he was given charge of the common purse for the Jesus cause. Perhaps he had been a tax collector and was good with numbers. Or perhaps he talked the group into trusting him with the funds in the hopes that he would someday serve as head of the treasury in the new kingdom Jesus kept talking about.

Somewhere along the way, he began to see how he could profit in the here and now. Skimming a little off the top. Setting aside a portion of the donations for his personal use. It was thrilling at first. And then he came to resent Jesus and the other disciples. How could they be so blind, so trusting? He should have

been caught long ago. If they didn't care to keep an eye on him, he would just go on stealing more, seeing how far he could take this thing.

So when Judas looks down at Jesus' feet and sees what Mary has done, he doesn't see an act of love and gratitude. He sees a waste of money, more money probably than he had in the whole common purse. With his deceitful tongue, he argues that they should have sold the perfume...you know, to give it to the poor. His value of money has blinded him to the value of Jesus.

Still, Mary's way of showing how much she does value Jesus seems rather odd. Jesus comes to her defense with the bizarre insight that Mary had purchased the expensive perfume for his burial. Jesus, who, as far as anyone knows, is not sick nor, at this point, condemned to death. What a strange thing for Mary to do. It would be like spending a million dollars on a grave blanket for an apparently healthy, successful, 33-year-old. Presumably, the flowers will be long gone before they're needed.

But that is the truly amazing thing about what Mary does. She gives Jesus something so rich, so costly, and it is completely useless, totally impractical. We might teach our children "it's the thought that counts" when they receive a gift that is not much to their liking. But this goes so far beyond that. In pouring out this perfume on Jesus' feet, it ceases to be useful to the rest of the world – either as a burial ointment or as a means to care for the poor. It is a lavish gift not only in its price but in its transience – a house filled for a moment with the fragrance of nard and the soft, slick feeling on the skin of Jesus' feet.

In all it's wonderful strangeness, Mary's offering was the perfect gift for Jesus, from one who knew him best. Mary, who sat and listened at the feet of Jesus, had been watching his every move and pondering his words. She knew the Jesus of overflowing abundance who turned water into 180 gallons of the finest wine and fed crowds of thousands with leftovers to spare. The Jesus of reckless healing, who made enemies by casting out demons and forgiving sins and restoring broken people to wholeness and community. The Jesus who is the living water and bread from heaven, offering eternal nourishment. The Jesus who marked himself for execution by raising Mary's brother, Lazarus, from death.

Mary had also heard the fearmongering among some of the temple leaders, those hoping to keep the status quo, prevent a riot, avoid rocking the boat of the Roman Empire. While Jesus' disciples were preparing for a rebellion, Mary was the only one who really saw what was going on. She knew he was marching to his death. And she knew better than to try to stop him. She knew, better than most, that death has no power over him.

Like the volunteer in the hospital, Mary occupies the sacred space between life and death. Just days before this dinner, Jesus brought her brother Lazarus back to life as her sister Martha fretted that the oils they had put on his dead body would not be enough to keep down the stench. A few days after this dinner, Jesus will die and be buried in such a hurry that they have no time to anoint the body. But here, in that space between her brother's resurrection and her Lord's death, Mary anoints Jesus' feet, letting the living Jesus enjoy the musky fragrance of the nard and feel the tender caress of her hair. She understands that the cost of the perfume is nothing in comparison to the price Jesus is about to pay for bringing the kingdom of God to earth. Mary knows the price of this treasure, the gift of Jesus, God's Messiah, and it far exceeds 300 denarii.

In the space between life and death, Mary understands Jesus' declaration that "you will always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." "The poor" is a stereotype, a faceless, generic group. "The poor" do not engender true compassion, as is evidenced by the fact that Judas uses them as a way to ultimately put more money in his pocket. "The poor," along with all the other categories of marginalized people, will always be with us. Because we will always try to group people together and label them so that we can figure out what to do with them.

We will always have "the poor." But we do not always have Jesus. We do not have Jesus when we act of our self-interest and greed. We do not have Jesus when we label and generalize about people. We do not have Jesus when we de-value other human beings.

We do have Jesus when we see each person as Mary saw Jesus – as an individual, as someone uniquely made in the image of God, as a person with a purpose and a path. We do have Jesus when we, like Mary, show love and gratitude. We do have Jesus when we value him over our own selfish desires.

The truly remarkable thing about that volunteer in the hospital, and the hundreds of other people who do what she does, is that she saw this stranger the way Mary sees Jesus. She took whatever information she had about him, and saw him as a unique, particular person, beloved of God. She realized his temporary nature, and she gave the valuable gift of her time to show love and gratitude to him while he was still living.

If we group people as "the poor" or "the dying" or "the underprivileged," we will always fail to meet their needs because we will always fail to see their true value. We will do what we want with what we have instead of experiencing the transforming power of radical love and self-giving. We might end up with more money, more leisure, more accolades. But there is so much we will miss.

Judas' path after this dinner in Bethany leads him to accept a bribe and betray his friend. It leads him to hopelessness and despair. We don't really know what happens to Mary. This is the end of her story in the gospels. But we might assume that she lives to see the resurrection of Jesus. She likely benefits from her brother's extended life. Perhaps she even teaches others the things she learned at the feet of Jesus.

What you do with what you have is entirely up to you. People will have opinions, yes. But the choice is ultimately yours. And that choice begins with how we see Jesus, and how we see Christ in each person we meet. When we value the presence of Christ in our lives above all else, and when we experience the presence of Christ in others, our gratitude overflows. There is no limit to the love we can give.

And so that is my challenge for us this week: Can we place greater value on Christ? Can we see Christ in others and value them as well? Can we value them in the particular and not just as generalities?

In doing this, we will not feed "the hungry" or tutor "the uneducated" or care for "the poor." Instead, we will share a meal with George, read Tamika's favorite book with her, and help Lorenzo get his driver's license. No matter the cost, because these people are Christ with us. When we have them in our lives, we have Jesus. And that is something more valuable than we can possibly imagine.

Thanks be to God. Amen.