

Leave Her Alone  
The United Church of Broomfield  
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**John 12:1-8**

<sup>1</sup> Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup> There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. <sup>3</sup> Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them<sup>[a]</sup> with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. <sup>4</sup> But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup> "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" <sup>6</sup> (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.) <sup>7</sup> Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup> You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

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This is one of those stories in the Bible with which most of us are familiar, at least we think we are. The scripture passage from today is referred to as "the woman with the ointment" and that woman is Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus. We immediately think of the story of Mary & Martha that appears in the gospel of Luke (10:38-42) and we remember it because it pits the two sisters against one another. Martha complains to Jesus that she's doing all the work while Mary worships at his feet and Jesus says, "Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken from her." What we hear or what we've been conditioned to hear is Jesus saying, "Martha you're wrong and Mary is right." We argue and debate the rightness and/or wrongness of Martha's type of worship (as servant) against that of Mary's (as pupil).

This Mary and Martha story that we're most familiar with is a separate story from the women with the ointment, that only appears in Luke. The "woman with the ointment" story appears in all four gospels with some variances in details, as can happen across the gospels. In Matthew and Mark, it is an unknown woman who anoints Jesus. In Luke, the woman is referred to as "a sinner." In the gospel of John, the women with ointment is conflated with the Mary and Martha story....thusly making Mary, the woman with the ointment.

In the Johannine version, we will focus on worship also, but it's not Martha versus Mary that spurs our explorations and discussion. The story takes place in Bethany at the home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha, just before Passover. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead in the previous chapter and both Martha and Mary verbally acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah. There is history and relationship here. As we've read, they prepared a dinner for Jesus and those who were with him. In this version we know that Judas is there, but there could be other disciples present as well. Martha served the dinner. Lazarus sat at the table with Jesus and others. During or after the meal, Mary took a pound of costly perfume, referred to in the other gospels as "spikenard" or "nard," poured it out onto Jesus' feet and then wiped it into his feet with her hair.

We assume that no one questions this act, but for Judas. "Why is this being allowed to happen? This valuable asset could have been used to benefit the poor, but instead it has been wasted."

Jesus says to Judas, "Leave her alone."

Jesus then explains to Judas why she's doing what she is doing, offering foreshadow, as well as wisdom.

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So, what do you think? If you were present in that room, how would you react?

Odd? Weird? Unusual? Perfectly normal? Just wrong, inappropriate?

Well, think about this? Spikenard was a very, very costly perfume, oil, or ointment. This wasn't a cheap liter bottle of Axe body spray, but rather a bottle of Chanel no. 5 parfum. As Judas says, the quantity that Mary pours onto Jesus' feet is worth 300 denarii, which is about \$105 in today's money. That's not much you might think, (Chanel no 5 = \$345/oz) but values of products and money have certainly changed in the last 2000 years. Think of how the value of a dollar has changed in our lives in the last 100 years.<sup>1</sup> In the 1<sup>st</sup> century, one denarii was approximately the wage per day, for a soldier. One denarii could buy 12 loaves of bread. So that jar of nard was about 10 months' salary.

This perfumed oil that she uses, spikenard, is fragrant – I mean **pungent**. The entire house was filled with the smell. It was used primarily for burial purposes to counter the odorous effects of a rotting corpse. A little goes a long way with spikenard, yet she pours a pound of it on his feet. The fact that she must use her hair to wipe it off speaks to the quantity. So let's talk about that.

She wipes his feet and the burial ointment **with her hair**. I've participated in foot washing services many times and often, most people refuse to go near someone's feet, let alone wipe them with perfumed oil *with their hair*.

Is Judas wrong to think about the financial aspects of this act? Despite scripture saying that Judas was a hypocrite and a thief in response to his comment, what would you do if I took a Rolex watch and began to use it as a hammer to put a nail in the wall and hang a picture?

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I may have shared this story with you before, so if I'm repeating myself, ah well ... When I was a kid, around age 7-8, I briefly attended a Pentecostal-Charismatic church. Grandma Walker was an elderly woman in our neighbor and on Sunday mornings, she'd gather up several kids to go to church with her. My mom was perfectly fine with this, since it meant her two precocious boys were out of the house for the day. Yes, I said DAY. The service at Grandma Walker's church was from 9am-3pm.

In worship I witnessed speaking in tongues. Almost every Sunday a person who normally and calmly spoke English that I understand, would start saying strange words and making odd sounds. Sometimes, they'd begin convulsing and fall to the fall. Grandma Walker said that they were filled with Spirit, overcome with the presence of the Lord. – I thought it was a little weird and scary, but ok.

When the pastor gave his sermon, people would jump up and shout, "Amen" or "preach it, Reverend." Even though I attended church with Grandma Walker for almost a year, I never got used to it and would often jump in my seat when the first, "Hallelujah" was shouted. – I thought it was unusual, but ok.

When the choir would sing, while the music was lively and worshipful, the hymns would go on for what felt like an eternity – repeating verses over and over and over again. – I thought it was boring.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.forumancientcoins.com/numiswiki/view.asp?key=ancient%20wages%20and%20prices>

I was quite judgmental.

What did I know about worship at 7 years old? Nothing. I just focused on what mattered and was important to me. Just like Judas, in today's scripture.

I think many people are guilty of this when it comes to worship.

Most of us are brought into corporate worship by our parents and families. Parents take us to churches that they believe worship correctly. Besides theology (beliefs about God and religion), many people pick (or don't pick) denominations and churches based on **HOW they do worship**.

The songs are too old and stodgy.

The music is too modern and loud.

That church isn't very reverent, the people never kneel.

They speak tongues in that church and that's just not right.

They partake in communion there – and I just can't handle that.

\* remember that there are teachings that the sacrament of communion is symbolic and/or literal. The bread and the wine are thought by some to become the actual flesh and blood of Jesus when the elements are blessed – transubstantiation. Many critics thought that "those Christians" are cannibals: eating flesh and drinking blood. THAT'S JUST WRONG!

I think that this is one of the messages to which today's scripture speaks. Is Judas upset with the cost of the nard and how it is "wasted," or is the problem that he doesn't approve of how Mary chooses to worship Jesus?

When Jesus tells Judas to leave Mary alone, I like to think that with everything that is happening in that passage, one thing is Jesus' message about worship. Mary's actions, odd, eccentric or wasteful as some might judge, are an act of worship. She is putting herself into a vulnerable position, physically, emotionally and financially, in order to worship the Messiah.

"LEAVE HER ALONE! Don't tell her HOW to worship. What she is doing is beautiful and selfless."

There are many people and churches who will tell us what right worship and wrong worship is.

Say this and don't say that.

Do this, but don't do that.

You have to stand or it doesn't count.

Children should be seen and not heard.

"Those" songs aren't true Church or worship songs.

Only the KJV should be read in church.

You can't be too loud, too creative, too demonstrative, or too \_\_\_\_\_.

In the Gospel of John 4:24, Jesus says, "God is spirit, and those who worship God must worship in spirit and truth."

What we humans so often do with God and religion is define, reduce and exclude. God is a mystery that can't and will never be constrained by such human boundaries. God and Jesus tell us that worship is spirit and truth. Worship is recognizing all that God is and all that God does.

According to A. W. Tozer, pastor and theologian, “Worship is to feel in your heart and express in some appropriate manner a humbling but delightful sense of admiring awe and astonished wonder and overpowering love in the presence of that most ancient Mystery, that Majesty which philosophers call the First Cause, but which we call Our [God] Which Are in Heaven.”<sup>2</sup>

So HOW does one do that?

Through prayer, song, kneeling, standing, dancing and applause.

Through praise, thanksgiving, intercession, generosity, learning, teaching and sharing.

By being vulnerable with our God – so vulnerable that we’re not just willing, but overjoyed to take expensive perfume and with our hair, anoint the feet of Jesus.

In this passage, if we are gracious with Judas, we can see that his focus isn’t necessarily wrong. We do bear responsibility for financial management and caring for the poor, but that’s not what’s important **in this moment**. He loses sight of what’s really happening. When he balks, “Why is this being allowed to happen? This valuable asset could have been used to benefit the poor, but instead it has been wasted...” The irony is completely lost on Judas that JESUS is the valuable asset that Judas ends up wasting.

His focus on money and waste is coming at the expense of Jesus’ life and Mary’s worship. Mary is focusing on her Lord, the Messiah, in a loving gesture of worship. Jesus will be arrested, tortured and crucified in the days ahead. In that moment, Mary’s worship was probably very comforting for him, as well as holy for her.

“It may well have been that, as He felt the whip lacerate His flesh, as He felt the nails pierce His hands and feet, He could also inhale the fragrance of that gift of spikenard and remember why He was doing this. Mary’s gift may have strengthened and encouraged Him, even throughout His horrific ordeal, as its strong scent still clung to His skin. Mary had not known it at the time she offered her valuable gift, but she was the first to anoint the Son of God as He became no longer simply their teacher but the ultimate sacrifice for the sins of the world.”<sup>3</sup>

HOW we worship stems from the passion and love for our God that we all have within us. It is our beautiful gift that we give to our God and carries us through life. No person can rightfully dictate or judge how we worship. If how you honor and glorify God is seen by others as ostentatious, extreme, or boring – so be it. Just tell judgers – Leave me alone.

AMEN

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/w/worship.htm>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gotquestions.org/spikenard-in-the-Bible.html>