



CROSS TRAINING: What price would you pay to get a (real) life?

Week Five:
Gospel Calculus
John 12:1-8

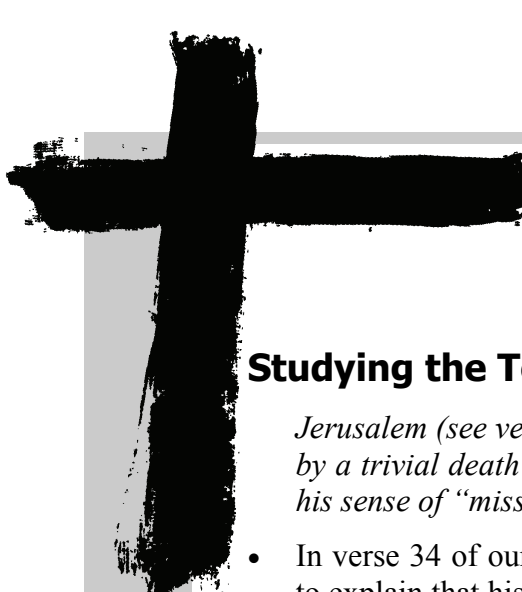
Preparing for the Text

On this fifth week of our Lenten journey, our text positions us as observers in a household in which Jesus apparently experienced some extraordinarily rare and important gifts from trusted friends. As we will later reflect on the significance of these extravagant gifts of love and care for Jesus, the very fact that Jesus could be fully “at home” amid all of the threats and criticism he was enduring on his way to a cross in Jerusalem is of great importance as one of the purposes of this all-church Bible study. We think it is of crucial value for every believer to identify and cultivate the kind of authentic community we see Jesus experiencing in the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary as recorded in our text. So as you prepare to study and discuss the poignant story recounted in this passage, spend a few minutes in your small group or class to hear the text in the context of your own life by sharing answers to one or more of the following icebreaker questions:

- Remembering how the poet Robert Frost famously spoke of “home” as the place where “they have to take you in,” where would you instinctively want to go in a time of either deep difficulty or great joy, knowing that the people who would meet and receive you there “always have your back?” What do these folks do to demonstrate convincingly that you are always welcome among “soul friends?”
- As you reflect on a lifetime of memories with people who know you *and still love you*, what are some of the most extravagant and heartfelt gifts you have received from these friends or family – i.e., what can you tell us about a time somebody may have given you a true gift from the heart (not necessarily very expensive, but something that had great sentimental value and meaning for you as well as the giver)?
- When was the last time you demonstrated your affection and appreciation for someone in a completely uncalculated (and perhaps even “crazy”) fashion that may have even surprised you? What did you do, and what did it mean to you?

Studying the Text:

Any careful reading of the Gospels will eventually demonstrate that the home of Lazarus and his sisters in Bethany was as close to a “private place” of intimate friendship as Jesus would ever know during his life on earth. Prior to our text in John 12:1-8, we are told that Jesus has deep love and concern for this family (see John 11:1-44). And in a very deliberate response to the illness and death of Lazarus, that long narrative eventually shows Jesus acting with a power beyond all imagining by miraculously resuscitating his friend, to the absolute astonishment of the dead man’s sisters, Martha



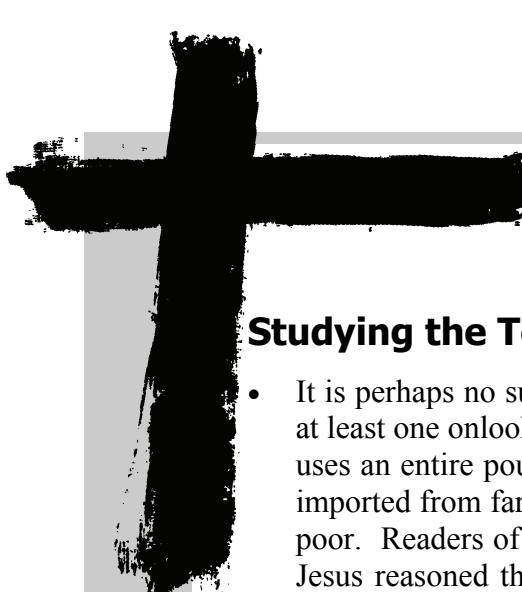
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Studying the Text (continued):

and Mary. Clearly this family and household was very dear to Jesus, and with that background in mind, take time with your group or class to discuss these questions after reading John 12:1-8.

- In verses 1-2 of our text, the Gospel storyteller informs us that Jesus is the guest of honor at a dinner held “six days before the Passover” in the home of Lazarus and his sisters. Knowing that the crucifixion and death of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels will occur in connection with the religious observances of the Passover festival commemorating God’s deliverance from bondage for the Hebrew people enslaved in Egypt, the narrator may be telling us that a similar act of deliverance or liberation may now be anticipated. At the very least, the dinner itself seems filled with a sense of drama and significance as the writer mixes talk of meals (like the Passover feast and this dinner with Jesus) with allusions to death and life after death (as in the case of Lazarus whom Jesus “had raised from the dead”). In this setting drenched with apparent symbolism and urgency, Jesus is honored by all three siblings (Lazarus, Martha and Mary), each in their own way. *What do the actions (or descriptions) of each of these siblings tell you about their roles in relationship to their friend, Jesus, and what importance does this seem to have if it is true that the storyteller is narrating the account of this dinner in Bethany for some specific purpose? Does your own relationship to Jesus at present seem to resemble any one of these three siblings more than the others, and if so, why?*
 - At the center of this story about a dinner in the village of Bethany (the name quite literally means “House of the Poor,” or “House of the Afflicted”), we find Mary extravagantly anointing the feet of Jesus with a costly gift roughly equivalent to the annual salary of an ordinary worker in Palestine (see verses 3-5). Culturally speaking, Mary is doing two unusual things that seem to indicate that she has a sense of understanding or premonition regarding the impending death of her dear friend, Jesus. First, she anoints his *feet* (not his head, as would be the case if one was anointing a king or an honored household guest), breaking cultural taboo by *touching* a Jewish male to perform an act of care typically reserved for the *dead*. And secondly, she unbinds her hair (again, something a woman would do only in the private presence of her husband) to wipe the feet of Jesus in an expression of love that would only be acceptable in public as a demonstration of love and grief in attending to a *corpse*. In other words, Mary seems in fact to be proclaiming the Gospel, for she has apparently come to understand that Jesus will shortly die. It may even be that Mary believes that the death of Jesus during this Jewish festival commemorating the sacrificial lamb of the Passover is an act of deep spiritual significance that she must in turn honor with her own radical expression of love. And as the storyteller explains, Jesus himself recognizes that Mary has correctly perceived the meaning of his life in this quiet moment of reverence and costly sacrifice (see verse 7), affirming the connection between what Mary has done in relation to his own approaching death. *Are there any ways in which you can draw a similar connection between what Jesus did and what you can do? Or to put it another way, is there a readily available place and time in which you can reflect the sacrificial love of Jesus by demonstrating your own understanding of the price he has paid to redeem us by making a costly or symbolic sacrifice of your own to honor him in your relationship with others?*
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Studying the Text (continued):

- It is perhaps no surprise that Mary's apparently wasteful act of anointing Jesus is criticized by at least one onlooker (see verses 4-6). Judas points out that the year of salary spent when Mary uses an entire pound of expensive perfume (imagine the *smell* of a *pound* of perfume perhaps imported from faraway India wafting through the house) could have been spent on food for the poor. Readers of John's Gospel may remember that earlier (6:7) in the narrative, a disciple of Jesus reasoned that even half the annual wages of a worker would have been insufficient to buy food for the crowd of more than 5,000 that would be fed from five barley loaves and two fish. But in pointing out that the criticism of Judas results from his greed and theft rather than an honest concern for the welfare of the poor (12:6), the storyteller merely recognizes that there is at least some truth to the complaint – i.e., Mary's act is *very* costly and extravagant to the point of obvious concern. After all, when we think about what we do week after week in our own worship and service in the name of Jesus, honesty compels us to admit that our lives are wide open to criticism by others who may see much more *practical* ways of making a positive difference in the world. *As you reflect on your own life as a disciple of Jesus, what would the evidence show? Could you be "convicted" of performing costly acts of worshipful obedience or loving sacrifice, or would an objective, outside observer finally conclude that you are the kind of religiously sane and sensible person seeking to "do everything in moderation?"*

Applying the Text:

As we have seen in this remarkable story, on his journey to a Roman cross Jesus encounters a true and devoted friend whose own act of costly and self-sacrificing love closely mirrors his own. Sometimes it appears that this kind of uncalculating generosity and unselfish love can only emerge with consistency within the context of an authentic and healthy relationship in which we are given freedom and support to do the things that lay deep within our hearts. If we truly know that we are safe to live with loving abandon among friends who can allow us to be ourselves without a need to *explain* our actions at all times, this text seems to suggest that incredibly significant and *redemptive* gifts may be released into the world. This is not to say that criticism will be nonexistent, for the text also reminds us that at least the possibility of betrayal always lurks within this very same community of discipleship (i.e., all of us surely recognize that the way that Judas thinks, speaks and acts will always remain uncomfortably familiar and sensible to us). But isn't it also possible for us to incite one another to engage in extraordinary acts of generosity, compassion and sacrificial kindness to others, becoming inextricably tied to the graciously redemptive way of Jesus himself in the ways we live and worship together as the Church? Would you not want to be part of a church in which the pastors spend their days trying to restrain *fanatics* rather than attempting to resurrect *corpses*?

Praying the Text:

Perhaps someone in your class or group wishes to receive prayer regarding some situation in which it has become clear that they are "holding back" to "play it safe" rather than letting go to honor Jesus in some fresh, new way. Pray for one another by laying on hands, interceding for those who wish to be released from this type of calculating spirit.