

Joyful Gratitude
Nov. 24, 2019
Brian R. Wipf

Judah and I like to listen to *Impossible Questions* on 99.3 in the morning when we're going to school and work. I don't remember the question exactly, but it went something like this: 25% of moms say their sons use too much of this? The answer: Cologne. Perfume and cologne are one of those things where less is more... but because those fragrances smell so good, it's just so hard not give it an extra spritz or two, or three... am I right?

I'm guessing we've all been a room where someone's perfumed filled the space. If you have sensitivities to fragrances, you probably know what that's like more than want. It can be overpowering. You can't miss it. And that's what the room must have been like when Mary took out about a pound of expensive perfume and poured it all over Jesus' feet out of grateful worship. As we lean into our Thanksgiving week, are you interested in having grateful worship? Would you like God to give you eyes to see his gifts, his grace where you're filled with joyful gratitude? That's where I'm hoping to lead you this morning with the word so turn with me to John 12 (READ vs. 1-8).

One of the more important details to know about this story is what happened to the man named Lazarus. In the previous chapter, we're told in great detail about the extraordinary events surrounding this man. Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha, lived in Bethany. We don't know exactly how Jesus knew this family. Jesus grew up in Galilee, way up north; Bethany is a small village in the south by Jerusalem. But as an adult, Jesus made many trips to Jerusalem and it seems Bethany was his favorite place to stay when he'd come. Somehow, Lazarus and his sisters got to know Jesus and became quite close. When Lazarus got sick, his sisters sent for Jesus saying, "the one you love is ill" - that sounds close to me. If you're unfamiliar with what happens next, let me briefly fill you in. Jesus doesn't leave to see and help Lazarus right away (we're told he's working on a God-sized plan with Lazarus) and Lazarus eventually dies from his sickness. His sisters are distraught; the village is mourning when Jesus comes to town - 4 days after Lazarus passes away.

A little bit of everything is found in this story in chapter 11. Tears. Truth. Hope. But the climax of this episode is Lazarus being brought back to life. Let's read that part from John 11:38-44 (READ). It's not hard to imagine that a dead man coming back to life was pretty much a seismic event. The world shook. Think of the impact this made. First of all, a ton of people started believing in Jesus - why wouldn't they, right? The Jews wanted to kill Lazarus. They could see their influence and control on the people slipping away and now this happens. If we kill Lazarus, we can say, "It was all a lie."

But the impact must have been the greatest in Lazarus' own home with his sisters Martha and Mary. Put yourself in Mary's shoes. Imagine how this impacted her. Consider the layers. First of all, she loved her brother! She and Martha begged Jesus to return so he would

be made well. She obviously cared for him. They grew up together; I'm sure she had fond memories of their time together. What joy she must have had to see her brother alive and well!

Another angle to consider is the unique arrangements of these three siblings. It's strange how there's no reference of parents or spouses in John 12. Just these three. Chances are Lazarus, Mary, and Martha were dependent on one another for the necessities of life with the two sisters particularly reliant on Lazarus. Obviously, we don't know the details of those things and it's always wise to be careful about speculating too much, but it's not a stretch to think that Mary and Martha lived with Lazarus and they were mutually dependent on each other with their daily needs and income. What would Mary and Martha do without their brother? How would they make a living? How vulnerable would they be without his protection, without his care. Sure, the grief must have been great, but she was about to face a very uncertain and worrisome future without Lazarus. And Jesus gave him back to her and with that gift he gave her a future as well. What a relief!

Finally, I don't think the spiritual impact was lost on Mary. It seems Martha was the thinker while Mary was the feeler. It was to Martha that Jesus gave his famous statement in John 11:25, which reads, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" Mary was the one who simply fell at Jesus' feet and said with tears streaming down her face, "Lord, if you would have been here, my brother would not have died." But just because Mary might have been the feeler doesn't mean she didn't carefully process what Jesus' actions and words meant. I mean the whole point of this entire scene was for Jesus to display his glory over death. Do you think Mary, Martha, and Lazarus missed that? All of all people? I'm not thinking so. Mary has now had several weeks to think through all that has happened and I'm not thinking the majesty, the glory of Jesus is lost on her. I'm not thinking she's missed all who Jesus is as the giver of life, both here on earth and in heaven forever. Yes, Jesus gave Lazarus a second lease on life, but even more importantly, Mary herself now has access to a new and deep supernatural life that comes by the merciful hand of Jesus.

Mary has a lot to be grateful for, doesn't she? Have you ever felt so thankful where no card, no gift, no words could capture your heart of joy? That's a strange feeling, isn't it? You know, you have so much joy; you're so thankful. It's a wonderful place to be. Yet, it's so frustrating. You just have to express this gratitude, but you don't know how to adequately do it. Every idea you have feels like it's cheapening your true feelings. There just aren't enough words; any gift isn't quite enough. That's Mary, it seems to me. So she takes the most valuable possession she has, something maybe that's been passed down by deceased parents, this expensive ointment and perfume and just pours it onto Jesus' feet. And then she takes her own hair, her own glory, and tries her best to evenly distribute the perfume over Jesus. And the room filled with fragrance.

More so, the room filled with love, it was filled with gratitude. Mary couldn't contain her appreciation, her thankfulness, her love for Jesus. It was an extravagant display, no doubt, but it

seemed fitting to her for a man who was more precious than life itself. Do you know who didn't like it so much? Judas. It's not by accident that Mary's actions sent Judas into a little tantrum. That's part of the story. The story isn't just about Mary's actions; it's about Mary's actions in contrast to Judas'. Let's look at what this passage says about Judas.

The first thing we learn about Judas is that he was a disciple. Judas was on the inside. He was one of the 12. He had a front row seat to everything Jesus said and did. What I find most telling about that is Judas knew what Jesus was like in private. Judas knew that Jesus was the real deal; he wasn't some showman, some con artist one way in public and then a scoundrel in private. Jesus is the same everywhere. And Judas knew that.

But in spite of Judas being a disciple, having access to the greatest teaching the world has ever known, seeing the miracles of Jesus with his own two eyes, he was also a betrayer. Judas stabbed Jesus and the other disciples in the back. You know, when you read the Gospel of John, it kind of comes across that John was still having a hard time forgiving Judas. It's like John considered Judas' actions so despicable and so hurtful that decades later anytime Judas' name is brought up, he can't help but point out the negative. And, of course, since this is God's Word, God himself wants us to see how bad Judas' conduct truly was.

On the face of it, Judas' criticism of Mary sounds right. 300 denarii, the value of the perfume, is a working man's income for an entire year. With today's exchange rate, we're talking \$30K-\$40K. But we know what's going on with Judas. He's a thief. It's all a show. He didn't care about the poor; he cared about himself.

Jesus commends Mary and criticizes Judas. Mary had this little window to give honor and praise to Jesus before his death; he wasn't going to be around very long. Mary most certainly didn't know the details about that, but he does say, "Look, I'm not going to be around much longer, let her worship me and honor me while she has this chance. The poor... you have the rest of your life to be merciful to them."

I go back to the contrast between Mary and Judas. In Mary's case, she's filled with joyful gratitude that bubbles up in extravagant worship. But Judas is blind. He's blind to who Jesus is and because of that he's blind to her expression of love, which makes me think of it this way: he was blind to why anyone would love Jesus like this. Isn't that an amazing thought? Can I make some observations and applications about that?

Gratitude is about seeing rightly. It's the product of recognizing and perceiving the good done to you as a gift of God that is undeserved. Mary was given that perspective. She was needy in every way. She lost her brother; her future was in doubt; her spiritual condition was addressed. And she saw that in every instance, she was needy... needy for God. And Jesus was the answer for her everytime.

Mary was given that glimpse through suffering. And I bring that up to remind you again of the redemptive opportunity we have through our pain and struggles. Don't curse your pain so quickly. Don't decide too early that there is nothing redeemable about what you're going through. Look, I understand just how unbearable the pain can be at times and it can be hard not to get trapped. But like for Mary, Jesus has got something in mind. He said of Lazarus' illness (John 12:4), "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." That's what God is up to with you. Remember that and you can find gratitude in the most unlikely times.

Also, notice how self-interest and self-focus robbed Judas of the ability to see. Obviously, Judas had a problem getting his eyes off himself; he had a problem not looking at worldly, material gain as the most important thing in his life. I mean, anyone who would betray a man unto death for 30 pieces of silver is too attached to riches. And so consider: wouldn't that keep Judas from seeing and prizing Jesus like he should? It seems that way to me.

I'm guessing many of us will be sitting down to a Thanksgiving feast this week of some kind. I love Thanksgiving food the best of any holiday. There's just something about the turkey, gravy, stuffing... oh boy. So, I usually don't eat all day. I skip breakfast. I try not to snack. I just don't want to spoil or to distract from my delight in the Thanksgiving meal. A steady diet of worldliness, friends, will not make you hungry for Jesus. Earthly success, earthly applause, money, possessions, comfort satiates enough of your body, mind, and spirit where the success, applause, riches, comforts of heaven don't seem all that desirable. I promise you: if you get a dozen donuts to eat an hour before your turkey feast, you won't be very hungry for your Thanksgiving Day meal. Judas was obsessed with money and that kept him from seeing the glory of Christ.

What might your joyful gratitude look like this Thanksgiving? How extravagant will your worship be? Well, here's the deal: it depends on what you see. You can't contrive or make up gratitude. It comes spilling out of you when you see something spectacular. Look for the splendor of Christ and you will be willed with joyful gratitude, too.