

**John 12:1-8**

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham

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

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My favorite worship service of the year isn't Christmas Eve, lovely though that service is. It isn't Palm Sunday, though I'm excited about the processional; or even the joyous celebration of Easter, though I do really hope you'll come! My favorite service of the year is Ash Wednesday.

There is something so powerful and tender about anointing forehead after forehead with ashes, and reminding each one—from the very elderly to the very young—that they're not going to be around forever. When I speak those words: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return," it's not just the recipient who is reminded of that. I'm reminded, too. I'm reminded of how fragile each person is, and how, at any moment, they could be taken away.

I loved that, in the service here, you had the opportunity to impose the ashes on one another. It was especially poignant for me to see a husband put the ashes on his wife; or a parent put the ashes on their child, and say, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." I wonder if, when you did that, you had the same refrain going through your mind that I always have, which is, "But, please, not yet."

I am never more aware of how precious each, individual person is, than when I am reminded that each one of them will someday be gone.

That's what Mary was feeling, when she poured that costly ointment over Jesus' feet. She was feeling the anticipatory grief of losing him, because she, unlike the other disciples, had actually been listening to him. She knew that his death was not in some far-off future, but close at hand, and she didn't want him to die without knowing how deeply she cared for him.

Of course, Judas ruined the moment and cheapened her gesture by making it about money. "Why wasn't this perfume sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"

It's not unlike the observation, so often repeated, that the vast majority of money spent on a person health care is spent in the last six months of that person's life. That statistic is used as a way of showing how medical technology has run amok, using medication and machines to postpone a death that's going to happen, anyway. The implication is that this is a waste.

It's the same criticism people used to make of Mother Teresa, who would seek out people who were dying on the street, and have them carried back to the mission, where they were washed and held and fed. When someone asked her why she would take all these resources that could have been used to help the living, and use them on someone who was going to die, anyway, she would say, "I don't want anyone to die without knowing that they are loved."

And the truth is, whether it's medical technology here, or food in Calcutta, to say that it's a waste to use it on someone who will die, anyway, is silly. Because we're all going to die, anyway, eventually. The important thing is for no one to die without knowing that they are loved. And that included Jesus.

"Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor?" Judas demanded. And Jesus, who was finally receiving the care *he* yearned for, was

jerked out of that moment of comfort. “You always have the poor with you,” he snapped at Judas, “but you don’t always have me.”

I wish he had said that in a different way, because those words are often used to dismiss the needs of the poor. But Jesus hadn’t spent his whole life caring for the poor and blessing the poor and demanding justice for the poor, only to throw them under the bus at the last minute. Instead, he was issuing a challenge to Judas, and to us. Judas asked his question while he, himself, was sitting on a bag of money. The poor had always been all around him. If they were that important to Judas, why wasn’t *he* spending money to help them?

Because truly, how we spend our money and our time and our attention, is the truest measure of what, and who, we care about.

Mary spent precious money to buy the perfume to anoint Jesus, because he was precious to her. And if she hadn’t done it then, she wouldn’t have had another opportunity, because he would have been gone. And Jesus received her gift as the sign of love she intended.

In the same way, all the money we spend on medical care in the last months of someone’s life isn’t a problem because of the amount. After all, we usually don’t know, for sure, that those *are* the last months of a person’s life. It’s only a problem if the medical care is prolonging suffering rather than promoting healing; or if it’s a substitute for love rather than a sign of love; or if it’s something we’re imposing on them out of our own fear of loss. Because that’s not really love.

Love pays attention to the true needs of a person, just as Mary paid attention to Jesus. And love remembers not to take the other person for granted, because they will not always be there.

So, take Mary’s actions as a reminder not to wait to show love to the people closest to you. Show love by listening to them, by drawing close to them, and by showing them how important they are to you in whatever way will mean the most to them.

And take her actions as a reminder to draw close to Jesus, particularly in this weeks when we remember his suffering and death. Draw near to him by caring for

the poor whom he loved and who are, as he said, always with us. And draw near by walking this journey with him toward the cross, paying prayerful attention to his words and his actions as he faces death.

It's the least we can do, since he takes such care to draw near to us. In all of our times of suffering, in all of our times of pain, and when we, ourselves, face death.

He is always with us, and at the greatest cost imaginable. Because of that, none of us dies, and none of us lives, without knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt that we are truly, deeply loved.