

I doubt that any of us would enthusiastically hold up Judas Iscariot, the disciple who betrayed Jesus, as a positive role model. But I have to admit, upon first reflection, when I think about Judas's response to Mary's actions at the dinner party she and Martha and Lazarus hosted for Jesus at their home, I wonder if perhaps on that occasion Judas was correct.

The dinner took place just one week before Jesus' death. Just one week before Judas took the despicable step of handing Jesus over to his enemies to be arrested, assaulted, humiliated, and crucified. Just one week before Judas made a fateful decision that resulted in his name forever being associated with treachery and deceit. After all, no decent and self-respecting person wants to be called a "Judas."

Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were three of Jesus's closest friends. While they could not have known that Jesus was mere days away from death, they would certainly have known that his words and actions over the preceding several years as a prophet and a healer, often speaking out defiantly against the powerful religious and political authorities of his day, placed Jesus in mortal danger. The home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus provided Jesus with a safe place and a refuge from the demands and dangers of his life. It was at their home in Bethany, over dinner, that today's gospel story took place.

During the meal, Mary took a container of very expensive perfume made of pure nard, which was oil extracted from a balsam tree, and she anointed Jesus' feet with it. The anointing of another person with oil has always held deep religious significance. In Mary's world, anointing was a symbolic action announcing that the person being anointed was favored by God.

Just how expensive was the perfume that Mary poured over Jesus' feet? We are told that it was worth 300 denarii, which represented one year's wages for an average worker. Translated into today's currency, the perfume that Mary poured over Jesus' feet was valued at somewhere between \$40,000 and \$50,000. A lot of money, for a symbolic gesture.

We know that Mary's actions beautifully reflected the reckless generosity of God. But Judas did not see it that way. He objected. He protested Mary's display of honor and affection toward Jesus. Judas said the perfume should have been sold and the tens of thousands of dollars received for it used to help the poor.

I must admit, Judas might have been right. Imagine taking your income for an entire year, whatever the amount, and spending it on perfume to anoint the feet of your closest friend. Now what rational person is going to do that? Mary's actions do seem extravagant and wasteful, don't you think?

I know that the gospel story also says that Judas was a thief, and because he was entrusted with overseeing the disciples' finances his real reason for objecting to Mary's action was that he wanted to sell the perfume and keep the money for himself, not give it to the poor. Even if we set aside Judas's underhanded motives, does it not remain true that Mary could have put the perfume to a far more productive and less wasteful purpose?

Apparently, and this might surprise you, Jesus did not think so. According to Jesus, Mary had done the right thing by anointing him with the precious nard, and it was Judas who was mistaken. Jesus rebukes Judas telling him to "leave her alone." Let Mary "keep the perfume for the day of my burial," Jesus said. "The poor you have always among you, but you will not always have me."

Jesus appeared to foretell that soon he would die, and his body prepared for the anointing of the dead.

Rather than looking at Mary's anointing of Jesus with expensive perfume and concluding as Judas did that it was a wasteful extravagance, perhaps we should interpret it as Jesus did. Mary's anointing was a gesture. A gesture of kindness and love. Like most gestures, Mary's anointing did not

substantively change any outcomes, because Jesus soon would die. But as is the case with the best gestures, Mary's anointing of Jesus must have made a difference to him. Her actions must have warmed the heart of Jesus. Surely it was wonderful for Jesus, mere days away from death, to receive Mary's remarkable demonstration of compassion and tenderness.

How do you react to this story? Who do you think interpreted most realistically Mary's gesture of anointing? I know it is not comfortable to admit that we might side with Judas over Jesus, but in this case, do you?

To make sense of this gospel story, I think we need to ask ourselves, what would it look like for us to give to God something extremely precious from our own lives? Do we really give God our very best, or do we give God the leftovers of our lives? Are we truly willing to trust God with all that we have, or do we hold back and play it safe out of uncertainty, or fear, or selfishness, or some other self-protective motive?

We know what we should do. We know what the story of Mary's costly anointing of Jesus is trying to tell us. We know that we should give our best to God. But do we? What might we do differently?

As I think about this unusual gospel story, I wonder why it is that Jesus values so highly Mary's extravagant and loving but essentially useless gesture. Maybe the lesson in all of this is that sometimes it is our seemingly useless gestures, actions that materially change nothing, that are in fact the way God works through us to make a difference to others.

I want to tell you a story. It is from the Second World War. Speaking as an historian I cannot say that I have verified every detail of the story. Speaking as a theologian – and all of us are theologians in our ongoing attempts to interpret scripture and arrive at a clearer understanding of God – I believe that enough of the story's details are accurate to demonstrate how a seemingly useless gesture that substantively changes nothing can nevertheless be enormously powerful and meaningful to others.

Dmitri Shostakovich was a successful Russian composer and resident of the city of Leningrad, which today is called St. Petersburg. In 1941, Shostakovich and several million of his fellow citizens suddenly were uprooted by the surprise bombardment of Leningrad by German forces that began a siege of the city eventually lasting almost two and a half years. As a sadly ironic aside, those innocent Russian citizens were subjected to horrors similar to what Russia today is inflicting upon the innocent citizens of Ukraine.

Shostakovich was evacuated from Leningrad, but he longed for his beloved city and began writing what is widely considered one of his greatest works – the Seventh Symphony. The symphony tells a story of war and sacrifice and heroism. It was inspired by and dedicated to the people of Leningrad.

The siege wore on through the terrible winter of 1941. Once the starving residents of Leningrad had eaten all the dogs, and cats, and rats in the city, some resorted to eating leather handbags and suitcases, wallpaper paste and sawdust, anything edible in a desperate attempt to remain alive. Many thousands of starved and frozen bodies littered the city's streets every day. Frail survivors, barely clinging to life themselves, lacked the physical strength to clear away the corpses. The death toll in the city climbed to 1.2 million people.

Shostakovich finished composing the Seventh Symphony early in 1942. Later that year it was performed to great acclaim elsewhere in Russia as well as in England and the United States. However, if the symphony was truly to come to life, it needed to be performed in the devastated and still besieged city of Leningrad. The sheet music to the symphony was smuggled past the German lines and into the city. A makeshift orchestra was assembled. Most members of Leningrad's premiere orchestra, the Philharmonic, had either been evacuated at the start of the siege or had frozen or starved to death. Rehearsals began.

We are told that many of the musicians were physically debilitated and barely had strength enough to lift their instruments. During the rehearsals orchestra members frequently fainted from hunger and cold. Finally, in August 1942, the ragtag, starving orchestra was ready. In an epic triumph of the human spirit, it performed the entire Seventh Symphony for an audience of emaciated but defiant citizens of Leningrad. Defiant, because the concert was held on the exact day that the mass murderer Adolph Hitler previously had boasted he would have dinner in a conquered Leningrad.

Leningrad held on. Its people never surrendered, and eventually the previously mighty German armies were forced to retreat.

Why do I tell this story in the context of Mary's decision to anoint Jesus with expensive perfume?

A symphony played by a starving orchestra to a starving audience is essentially a useless gesture. It did not shorten the siege and help to defeat the enemy. It did not provide any food or fuel to the starving, freezing citizens of Leningrad. But it did inspire, even if only for a day or an hour, the desperate people of Leningrad, who were beaten down almost to death, to hold on a little longer until their liberators arrived.

I wonder if Mary's seemingly useless and wasteful gesture might similarly have helped to sustain Jesus as he approached that final, horrible week of his life.

I suspect that all of us, while thankfully not facing the extremes that Jesus and the Leningraders faced, have encountered times in our lives when it felt like our bodies, our minds, our spirits, were being pushed to the limit of what we thought we could endure. Times when comfort and reason and relief seem beyond reach. It is at such times that being on the receiving end of a seemingly useless gesture from someone else is what sustains us. Reinforces our will to continue for another day

The gesture need not be an act like Mary's spending a small fortune. More likely, the gesture that is given and received is something as simple as a comforting word, a look of concern and care, a sincere and gentle touch, a quiet prayer, just being present with the other person whose difficulties far surpass our ability to fix. All of those actions are a type of anointing as well. Actions that on the surface change nothing, but on the inside make all the difference to the person receiving them.

What do I conclude from all of this? I conclude that Judas got it wrong. Which means that I, too, was wrong in how I first interpreted Mary's action of anointing. Judas might have known the cost of the perfume, but he failed to appreciate the value of Mary's action. Mary, by contrast, knew how to love without counting the cost.

So, ask yourself: What is the seemingly useless gesture of understanding and love that you can offer to someone else? **Amen.**

Fifth Sunday in Lent

3 April 2022

Rev. Dr. Keith Fleming