

Questions for Jesus: What Matters Most?

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
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John 12: 1-8

Do you recall the board game, Clue? I've always liked the game, perhaps because of the interesting, indeed odd, group of characters. You remember: Professor Plum, Mr. Green, Colonel Mustard (always made me think of Captain Kangaroo), Mrs. Peacock, Mrs. White, and Miss Scarlet – for some reason I always suspected her. What an eclectic bunch to invite to your home for a dinner party. But then again, it was never your run-of-the-mill dinner party. Death was hanging in the air; there had been a murder; there was a mystery to be solved. All of us playing the game were trying to figure who "done" it, in which room, and with which weapon...Miss Scarlet with the lead pipe in the library.

Now, you may ask, what does the game of Clue possibly have to do with our text for today? Well, the text presents us with another dinner party, a party with another rather eclectic guest list. Certainly death hangs in the air and a rather mysterious and unexpected event takes place during dinner. We find ourselves with a mystery to be solved.

Now we have met all the players in this biblical drama before. Recall the earlier meal at the home of Martha and Mary when Martha is bustling around trying to get everything ready, worried about every last detail, wondering how that spot got on the good china. Meanwhile, her sister, Mary, is seated at Jesus' feet, listening to his teaching and not lifting a finger to help Martha. We find ourselves once again together with them in their home, getting ready for another meal. Wonder what will happen this time?

But, along with Martha and Mary, we discover that their brother, Lazarus, is also there. Now that might not be remarkable, except for the fact that just a few days ago, Lazarus was dead. Not just slightly dead, but four days dead in the tomb. But Jesus has come to that tomb and called him out of his grave. The grave clothes are gone, and a very much alive Lazarus is now seated at the table. Not even Col. Mustard ever did that. What was that I said about death hanging heavy in the air? John doesn't give any details, but wouldn't you love to have listened in on that dinner conversation. "Say Lazarus, anything new or unusual in your life these days?"

But there is more. The raising of Lazarus has proven to be the last straw for the principalities and powers – the leaders of the Jerusalem religious establishment. Jesus has grown too powerful, too much of a threat. He has made it to the top of their most wanted list and they have decided that this Jesus must die. His days are numbered and he knows it. Again, death hangs in the air. How ironic that Lazarus, who was raised from the dead, is destined to outlive the one who raised him. Says Barbara Brown Taylor, "A trade has occurred and Lazarus does not even know it". Jesus was more or less safe as long as he stayed across the Jordan, beyond the reach of his enemies in Jerusalem. But by returning to Bethany to save his friend, he has signed his own death warrant. Practicing what he preaches, he has traded his life for the life of his friend."

But back to the guest list. Judas is also there. If he is there, I think we can assume the other disciples are there as well, but Judas is the one who is mentioned. Judas the betrayer; Judas who is also described as a thief; Judas, a foreboding sign of what is to come. The enemy is not just at the gate; he is seated at the table with Jesus. Says Sarah Webb, a Disciples of Christ minister, "The stage is set for absolutely nothing normal to happen at this dinner party. And absolutely nothing normal does."

"Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house filled with the fragrance of the perfume." Now there is something you don't generally see at a dinner party! Our attention shifts to Mary, Mary, who never speaks a word in this narrative, now takes center stage. Scholars have pointed out four remarkable aspects of Mary's action:

- Mary loosens her hair in a room full of men. This is a rather intimate act which a respectable woman would never do in public.
- She pours the ointment on Jesus feet, something that is never done; the head, perhaps, but not the feet. Why the feet?
- She touches him, caressing his feet, again something that was never done by a woman in public, not even among friends.
- She wipes his feet with her hair - a totally inexplicable act of intimacy and love.

It is extravagant. It is excessive. Mary is way over the top here, something Judas is only too happy to point out. "Why has she wasted this expensive ointment on your feet? Think of the money it could have been sold for, money we could have given to the poor." Of course, his comments sound like the height of hypocrisy when it is pointed out that Judas was stealing from his friends, but one could argue he has a

point. Really, Mary, is all this excess necessary? But, perhaps surprisingly, Jesus himself insists that it is. “Leave her alone. She has done what needed to be done. The poor you will have with you always, but you will not always have me.” Does it strike you as odd that Jesus, the champion of the poor, who makes a regular practice of putting the needs of the poor above his own, would make such a comment? Some have actually used these words to justify backing away from and doing less for the poor. But in doing so, I believe they are behaving more like the hypocritical Judas...any excuse not to be generous and caring.

I think Jesus says what he says because he wants everyone to know that they are witnessing an unusual act for an unusual time. Jesus sees it as an extravagant expression of her love, of her faithfulness, of her discipleship. Mary seems to get it; to see what no other can see and that is why she does what she does. Says Taylor, “So Mary proceeded to rub his feet with ointment so precious that its sale might have fed a poor family for a year, an act so lavish that it suggests another layer to her action. There will be nothing prudent or economical about the death of this man, just as there had been nothing prudent or economical about his life. In him, the extravagance of God’s love is made flesh. In him, the excessiveness of God’s mercy is made manifest.” An extravagant act reflecting an extravagant love.

Everyone knew that a true king would be anointed on the head. Mary anoints the feet. The only time feet were anointed was when a corpse was being prepared for burial. A storm is brewing in the distance and Mary is giving us the forecast. She takes on the role of a prophet, a truth teller. She is acting out a truth that no one dares to speak. She sees what no one else in the room can see. She is showing us just what kind of Messiah this is – one who serves, who takes the narrow path, who gives his life for his friends, one whose reckless and extravagant passion for love and healing and justice will eventually take him to a cross. Again, there is nothing frugal about this love

And there is nothing frugal about hers. In her, we see not only the prophet, but also the true disciple. A Fred Craddock story: “When my wife and I visited Ireland, we noticed behind the farmers’ homes and cottages, little yards fenced in, and there’d be a donkey back there in the backyard, like some people would have a dog. I’d say to the people in the cottage, ‘Well, you’re still using a donkey to work the peat fields.’

“ ‘Oh, no, we now have a motorized plow to work the field.’

“ ‘But I see that you still have a donkey.’

“ ‘Oh yeah, the donkey pulled our plow and cut the peat for many years. We don’t need him now, but we would never get rid of him or sell him. That donkey is part of the family.’

“ ‘You mean you just keep him back there, feed him, take care of him, pay the vet bills?’

“ ‘Yep, that’s just what we do.’

“ ‘But why? Isn’t that terribly expensive?’

“ ‘Yes, it can be expensive, but what’s the alternative. We really love our donkey.’

Says Craddock, “Sometimes, beyond the practical, to the level of love, the rules change so much that you would risk a great deal...even to take care of a donkey.” Or even anoint the feet of the Savior. Well, no one ever accused Mary of being practical.

In the words of Sarah Webb, “Mary pulls out all the stops. In a last ditch effort to show her love, she brings everything she has to the table. When none of them knows what Jesus needs as the plot of his life thickens, when none of them can anticipate what Jesus’ actions will cost him personally, Mary sacrifices first. She offers the most expensive thing she owns and by use of her own body, she breaks with propriety and follows her heart. In an act of love so extravagant that it leaves her dinner guests with their mouths hanging open, she anoints her friend for his sacrificial death. Mary becomes the first among them to incarnate Jesus’ commandment that we love one another as Jesus has loved us. Discipleship has seldom smelled so sweet.”

Mary shows us who still struggle along the path what it means to follow, what it looks like when we make way for the Christ among us. She is the one, the first one, to embody what it means to be a community shaped by love, a love beyond the practical, and grounded in a relationship with Christ. We tend to go along, so careful, so practical, so prudent, so cautious with our love. And then we meet Mary at that unusual dinner party and we see, truly see, that disciples are people like her – people whom Jesus loves and who love him and who dare to extravagantly live out that love, without regard to what is practical, prudent or even proper.