

## **“The Sweet Scent of Gratitude and Encouragement”**

**John 12:1-8**

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I'm not sure what she had been saving it for, but without a doubt it was her most valuable possession. After all, it was worth over a year's wages. Perhaps she was keeping it to sell in case of an emergency or to take care of her when she was old. Maybe she was going to use it sparingly for special occasions or mix it with burial spices when loved ones died.

Whatever she had in mind changed the evening Jesus came to a dinner given in his honor six days before his crucifixion. As he reclined to eat with his disciples and Mary's brother, Lazarus, Mary entered the room carrying this sweet smelling offering. She opened it and poured all of it on Jesus' feet. Quickly, the room was filled with the sweet smell of perfume and the foul odor of criticism.

“Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages?” Judas asked this question, according to John, not because he had such a sensitive social conscience, but a selfish heart. John accused Judas of pilfering in the disciples' treasury, and as a result, attributes his discomfort to his greed.

What was Jesus' reaction to Judas' bold criticism and suggestion? “Leave her alone. It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me” John 12:7-8. Jesus saw into Judas' heart and recognized his motives. As a result, he reprimanded Judas, not Mary.

What are the lessons we can learn from this story? Let me share some for you to ponder.

**Be careful about judging others' decisions. They may have reasons completely unknown to you for what they do.** Mary certainly did.

Her heart was filled with love and gratitude for Jesus. Most recently, he had raised her beloved brother, Lazarus, from the dead. How could she let him know what was in her heart? Words were inadequate; only the most lavish generosity could express her feelings.

In addition, I think Mary sensed the danger that Jesus faced by coming to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. She knew that he was taking a great risk and might not survive. Perhaps she had heard that the authorities were searching for him as well as her brother, Lazarus. Both represented threats to their control and exploitation of the people.

How could she encourage Jesus and let him know that she appreciated his sacrificial courage? She found a way, didn't she?

Can you imagine how her act of lavish generosity made Jesus feel just days away from being crucified? It had to move and inspire him, giving him the confidence he needed to be faithful all the way to the cross. As a matter of fact, this humble act of devotion may have given him the idea for washing the disciples' feet the following week in the Upper Room.

Who needs your encouragement because they are going through the valley of the shadow of death? What could you do to lift their spirits?

What peacemaker needs encouragement? Who is on the front line speaking truth to power that needs to know you appreciate their courage? Follow Mary's lead and get in touch with him or her. Do something that clearly demonstrates your support, even if others don't fully understand.

There is another lesson in this story that speaks clearly to me. **When faced with a decision between two good choices, ask God to help you to be sensitive to what is needed at the time.**

Choices between good and good are agonizing, aren't they? These are the ones that keep me awake at night. Choices between good and bad are much easier to make, not that I always do what is right. However, choosing between competing good choices is tough. How do you decide?

I believe you ask God to help you decide what is needed at the moment. You might not have made the same decision a month prior or may not make the same decision a month later. That's all right. Assess what is needed under current circumstances and do it.

Who can argue with giving to the poor? Matthew reports that even the other disciples voiced their support for Judas. They were on board with him, but surprisingly, Jesus was not.

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Was Jesus justifying selfishness? Was he ignoring poverty? Was he absolving his disciples of their responsibility to help the disenfranchised? Certainly not. No one could accuse him of being insensitive to the plight of the poor or overlooking their needs. His words should never be misconstrued to imply this. The emphasis is on the final part of the sentence, not the first. "You will always have the poor among you, **but you will not always have me.**"

Timing is everything. Knowing what to do in the moment is the sign of a wise person. Mary knew. The disciples did not.

How did Mary get so wise? Do you recall the time she was criticized by her own sister, Martha, for sitting at Jesus' feet listening to him instead of helping in the kitchen? I think she became wise because she was a good listener and student. She spent time listening to Jesus teach about God, relationships, love, affection, encouragement and hope. When it came time to decide what was needed from her less than a week before the crucifixion, she knew.

I hope you are a good student, also. What you learn will help you make wise decisions, too, especially when faced with competing choices that are good.

I see a final lesson I want to share. **Don't let a critic have the final word. Jesus did not.** "Leave her alone," Jesus replied.

There is no shortage of people ready to spoil special moments with God and others or rain on a parade. You can't prevent them from doing this, but you don't have to let them have the final word.

How do you think Mary felt after Judas' criticism? Embarrassed. Guilty. Confused. After all, how could twelve men be wrong and one woman be right? There was certainly no precedent for this.

No doubt she began second guessing her decision, wondering if she had made a horrible mistake. That is until Jesus quickly spoke up and came to her defense. He wanted everybody in that room to know that Mary got it right, not the disciples. Can you imagine what this did for her self-esteem? It gave her another reason to love him even more.

Don't let a critic have the last word when someone is doing a good deed. Follow Jesus' lead. Commend that person for making a wise decision. Let the final word be as kind as the deed.

This week, I challenge you to listen to your heart. Seize the day. Spread the sweet scent of gratitude and encouragement everywhere you go. What a difference you will make. Ask Jesus and Mary.