I have a confession to make. Sometimes when I am walking in a mall a woman will pass by me and a catch a brief whiff of her perfume. It is very brief but enjoyable. How about you? Have you smelled an excellent perfume? I suspect that most of us have, and unless we are allergic to perfume, we enjoy the fragrance. If you put a dash of perfume or cologne on the neck or wrist it gives a whiff of a nice fragrance. But perfume isn’t just used for that pleasant fragrance when someone walks by. It can also be used to hide other fragrances – or odors. Some early burial ceremonies included perfume being poured over the body to cover the smell of decay or disease. It was typically used after a person died, but in today’s story, Jesus was anointed with perfume prior to his death.

There are three anointings in the Scriptures regarding Jesus. The first occurred in Bethany at the house of Simon the Pharisee.

**Luke 7:36-38 (ESV)**

***36****One of the Pharisees asked him (Jesus) to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at table.****37****And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment,****38****and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment.*

On this occasion a woman (apparently one known to be a sinner) approached Jesus, broke open a bottle of perfume and began crying. She anointed Jesus’ feet and wiped them with her hair. This seemed to occur when John the Baptist was still alive – early in Jesus’ ministry.

The third anointing is found in both Matthew and Mark’s gospels. (Mat. 26:5-7, Mark 14:3).

Matthew 26:6-7 (ESV)

***6****Now when Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the lepe]****7****a woman came up to him with an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment, and she poured it on his head as he reclined at table.*

This occurred in the house of Simon the Leper in Bethany. Two days before the Passover, an unnamed woman broke an alabaster jar of fragrant oil and poured it on Jesus’ head.

In this message we will explore Jesus’ 2nd anointing, which we find in John 12.

# John 12:1-8 (ESV)

***12****Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.****2****So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table.****3****Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.****4****But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said,****5****“Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?”****6****He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it.****7****Jesus said, “Leave her alone, so that she may keep itfor the day of my burial.****8****For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me.”*

This story in John is taking place after a darker turn in the narrative. Jesus is approaching his death, and has been for the last few chapters, especially since the raising of Lazarus. All the gospels slow down immensely when it comes to the last week of Jesus’ life—about a third of each one is dedicated to the events of just a few days. Think about that—they skip through a lot of Jesus’ life. We see him as a baby, then as a twelve-year-old in the temple, then as a full-grown man. Then they skip around through his ministry career—a whole year might pass within a few verses. And yet when it comes to his last few weeks, the narrative slows down significantly. Jesus’ dialogue and prayers are reported in detail, and conversations are jammed right up against each other.

Today’s story is like that.

*Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.So they gave a dinner for him there. (**John 12:1-2 ESV**)*

The name *Bethany* is translated by some to mean “house of figs,” as there are many fig trees in the area; others translate it as “house of misery,” speculating that Bethany was a designated place for the sick and those with contagious diseases. It’s a small town about two miles outside of Jerusalem, and some speculate that it was more of a subdivision than an entire town. It reached to the Mount of Olives, and it is the place from which Jesus ascended. Today it is still a small town with a population of about 1,000 and the traditional tomb of Lazarus is still marked.

So Jesus comes to dinner with his friends and Mary does something extraordinary.

*Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard. (**John 12:3 ESV**)*

This Mary we’ve met before. She is the sister of Martha and Lazarus. Martha had earlier complained to Jesus that her sister wasn’t helping with Martha’s “many tasks.” He reminded her that Mary had chosen the better part—to sit at Jesus’ feet and listen. From early on, Mary seemed to “get it.”

Jesus and Mary seem to have a special relationship, a special understanding. For example, Jesus kept it together for the most part when he heard that his friend Lazarus had died. He told everyone to wait and see, and he talked theology with Martha. He only loses it when he sees Mary. Then we read the shortest, and one of the most poignant verses in the Bible, John 11:35, “Jesus wept.” He maintains his emotional equilibrium until he sees her.

That’s what I love about this moment here. Here is Mary, who gets it. Mary, whose sister thinks she’s not doing what is most important but she’s the one who knows what is important.

That’s one of the telling studies as you look at the gospels. The people that Jesus reveals himself to, or who first note who he is, are often those considered less than by others. We have a demon-possessed man who lives among the tombs and cuts himself. Or we have the Samaritan woman who has been through several marriages and is living with another man, who comes to the well in the middle of the day to avoid everyone else. Then we have Mary, the one who doesn’t help her sister, who comes in with an expensive bottle of perfume and…

*… anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. (**John 12:3 ESV**)*

It’s almost like everything stopped and silence took over the room. As I’ve said, the narrative is running along at a clip—Jesus has been healing, teaching, dodging the bad guys. Miracles and near-misses left and right—the cultured elite and the politically powerful closing in on him; Jesus showing his own emotional side, weeping at the tomb, and then….STOP.

The story will go slowly from here on out. Detail after detail, teaching after teaching, we will walk closely with Jesus in his last days.

John wants us to know that Mary poured perfume worth a year’s wages on Jesus’ feet. One of the more expensive perfumes in the world is Sabi by Henri Dunay, which costs about $30,000 a bottle. That’s what we’re talking about here. No wonder Judas Iscariot wanted to get his hands on it.

You can imagine the fragrance from the perfume not only going through the room, but outside the house, drawing others in to see what’s going on.

The disciples’ reaction is painfully predictable:

*But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said,“Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?” (**John 12:4-5 ESV**)*

Some of the footnotes say this was a year’s wages for a common worker. There were similar reactions to the other two anointings in the Scriptures. Why this extravagance? Why this waste?

*Why this waste?* How many times have we said that? We live in an interesting time now when people don’t seem to have time for anything. Books take too much time and energy, so we put them on audio so we can listen to them while we are doing something else. Shopping takes too long, too much effort, so we do it from home online—with one click on “Skip the Dishes—so that it’s taken care of, and we can get back to doing other stuff.

Yet even in this crazy time, we faithful believers still choose to stop everything and attend worship services in person. That seems a little insane to the rest of the world—there’s no product produced that they can see; there’s no entertainment value. They can’t believe that we actually give money rather than take it. And church is imperfect—if you want to hear music, turn on your iTunes, if you want to hear a sermon, look one up on YouTube. Why this waste? Why waste your time—the most precious commodity you have—on this humble gathering?

Yet that’s the deal. That’s the point. We have a deeper thirst, and only this “humble gathering” will do. Just as Mary had a deeper thirst and a deeper understanding—that this particular moment was worth her special bottle of perfume. Somehow, she knew it was time to stop and anoint Jesus.

We need to follow’s Mary’s example and put what is important first. We live in a world that abounds in distractions. You are probably carrying a distractor in your purse or pocket. We don’t call them distractors but smart phones. And you know, as I do, that we never more than a click or touch away from the siren song of Facebook posts, text messages or click bait on some obscure Internet site.

With all the stuff we have going on and all the other “deadly important” things we’re up to, we also need to STOP. Stop and let the fragrance of worship fill our house.

Judas’ question is so classic: Why wasn’t this perfume sold to feed the poor? Here we go. He was recommending a “good” thing. Do you know what the enemy of the best always is? The good. The good is the enemy of the best. Judas is offering the sensible alternative, and in the other anointing accounts in the other gospels, the other disciples recommend the same. The sensible thing to do would be to sell the perfume and give this money to those in need.

Yet here is where we see Jesus, once again, telling them he is more than just another prophet, more than just someone who’s calling them to moral action or stricter obedience.

*Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. For the poor you will always have with you, but you do not always have me. (**John 12:7 ESV**)*

Jesus accepts this act of worship; he is commending Mary’s act of worship. Every prophet worth his salt would have torn his clothes at this point—worship is only meant for God.

And Jesus says….YES!

“You will not always have me.” May those words echo to us. They already echo in our desire to share God’s love and life with others. We love others not because of who they are or what they do, and especially not because of who we are, but because of who Jesus is.

Steven Hawking, the great British physicist, died not long ago. As an avowed atheist he is known for saying there is no heaven. He believed heaven is just a fairy tale that people tell each other to make themselves feel better in the face of a short life and a long death. We could offer a slight modification on that: “there is no human goodness, it’s only a fairy tale.” Human goodness, the goodness of the human spirit, is a myth that people tell themselves to make themselves feel better. But James tells us, “Every good and perfect gift is from above” (James 1:17)—all the goodness, graciousness, love that we see in the world and in ourselves is a gift from God. And the best good, the best graciousness, the best love happens when we love Jesus first – when we figuratively pour that bottle of expensive perfume over his head or anoint his feet – when we give our hearts to him!

When we give our perfume to him first, that’s the only way there’s enough for everybody. That’s the only way there’s enough left. When we give our time and attention to him first, that’s when we have time and attention left over for the people we love, even the things we love.

Finally, a parallel here. Judas’ reaction, and the real reason behind it…

*He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it. (**John 12:6 ESV**)*

Here Judas is, being secretive, taking care of himself. At least he has some understanding that he’s part of something real and new here with Jesus, and yet he is still focused on what doesn’t matter. He is selling his soul here for a handful of toonies. His priorities are obvious, and in the end, he doesn’t care, he doesn’t trust, he doesn’t believe.

He speaks with secretive, hidden, double meanings. Many addicts in recovery will have on their wall, if not tattooed on their arm the proverb: “Keep it simple.” Simplicity, let your yes be yes and your no be no. When meanings start to get doubled, when secrets start to get whispered, watch out—this is fertile territory for sin. Secrecy is the petri dish that sin grows in.

Parallel that with Mary’s act.

*Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. (**John 12:3 ESV**)*

This is an extremely intimate act. She is transgressing several cultural boundaries here—ignoring some big taboos. An unmarried woman was not to even touch a man, and never a Rabbi teacher like Jesus! This alone was presumptuous – and then letting her hair down, that was huge. Letting her hair down publicly in the presence of men was strictly forbidden.

Yet that is the parallel here with Judas. As he takes things in secret and puts them away in secret, so Mary is out in the open, spilling the perfume, letting her hair go everywhere, kissing feet. This intimate moment is an act of utter openness, complete abandon in worship. The perfume is gone in a moment, and yet the fragrance of it remained.

An entire bottle of perfume poured on Jesus. Jesus smelled like perfume – he smelled like adoration and worship. Between this anointing and the last one that took place a couple of days before his death, it’s possible that he smelled sweet even as he died. In the stinking smell of blood, urine, and feces at the cross, Jesus had the fragrance of worship, the fragrance of grace still lingering on him.

May we worship him with the same kind of abandonment that Mary expressed. May we see Jesus as he is and worship him. May the fragrance of grace linger on you today. May you have that fragrance of worship, love, and freedom that we know as the children of God. May people smell you coming and be lifted up and lightened by your presence. Breathe deeply my beloved brethren. Amen.