

Yr. C, Lent 5
April 3, 2022
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1403 Words

Lessons: Isaiah 43:16-21
Psalm 126
Philippians 3:4b-14
John 12:1-8

“What in the world is she doing...with \$25,000 worth of perfume?”

This is the question that most, reasonable Church people *I know* would be asking—at least *silently asking themselves*—if sweet Mary, friend of Jesus, was over here splashing a whole pound of expensive fragrance all over his feet, and wiping it up with her hair.

It's the 'Judas question' reframed to help us grasp the present value of what was almost a year's worth of wages back then.

The census data for our zip code, 29615, tells us that the median household income around here is \$62,600. So I conservatively cut that in half, figuring that many households have two earners. Then I trimmed the number again because Mary's perfume was 300 days' worth of wages, not a full 365. And, yet, \$25,000 *still* sounds like a lot of money—a *ton of money for perfume*. What in the world???

See, that 'Judas question,' it just rises up in me. And I *know* I'm right. You know how it is when you just *know* you're right about something—especially something to do with money. You feel like throwing down the gauntlet...like Judas did.

I'll own it. If we had a vestry member propose spending \$25,000 of our precious budget on pure nard for the Maundy Thursday foot washing liturgy, I'd try to clip that idea in the bud before things got out of hand.

If Mother Marie suggested that we really upgrade our incense for the Easter Vigil—you know, like having some pure frankincense overnighted on Good Friday from the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem—well, that's not a good example, because I might say “yes” to that!

Yall! Incense! It's biblical! The Psalmist sang about it. The Magi brought it to Bethlehem. It's *the* perfect symbol of our prayers rising up to heaven. Alright...I'm kidding—we're not going to spend \$25K on frankincense.

You see what I'm doing, right? I'm doing the two things we often do when talking about money. We either get all indignant and self-righteous about it, like Judas did; or we distract, diverting peoples' attention away from the heart of the matter. In fact, we are especially good at diverting *our own attention* from the heart of the matter.

Instead of cracking jokes about incense, what if I was instead asking how much money each one of us might be willing to give as an authentic expression of our authentic *devotion* to Jesus Christ?

A *year's* worth of our wages? I doubt it. Three hundred days' worth of wages? Probably not. Let's be reasonable—how about 10% of our income, you know, the biblical standard for devotion to the Lord? That still sounds like a stretch for many of us. What about a monthly car payment's worth of devotion? Okay. Let's at least match our devotion with our cell phone bill, or our lunch allowance, or our morning coffee routine.

Now, we are able to see Mary's authentic devotion to Jesus in a whole new light. Devotion to Jesus—*this* is the heart of the matter in today's Gospel. Mary's devotion *and our devotion*. We know that Mary's not holding back. She is—*literally*—pouring it on.

Let that soak in for a moment. We need to be challenged by Mary’s deep, heartfelt gratitude and love, and then ask ourselves, “in which aspects of my life am *I* holding back...in what sorts of ways might I try pouring it on?”

Before we can talk meaningfully about generosity, we have got to get in touch with our gratitude...and the Psalmist can help us! He remembers when the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, and so he wrote a song about it! Listen to the passion in his voice when he sings, “The LORD has done *great things* for us, and we are glad indeed!”

You see, the Psalmist remembers when life was restored! “Then,” he sings, “*then* were we like those who dream! *That was when* our mouth was filled with laughter...and our tongue with shouts of joy!”

Do yourself a big favor, before this Lent of ours slips by. Set aside a chunk of time this week and get in touch with your gratitude. Remember the times when you have felt restored, redeemed, rescued, or maybe protected, supported, or encouraged.

Who are the people God has placed in *your pathway* who have done great things for you—and not just during the pandemic—we need to remember a lot further back than that!

When have you been blessed with enough freedom for your mouth to be filled with laughter, and with songs or shouts of joy? When have you been blessed with enough hope to dream a little? When have you sowed with tears, only to harvest with songs of joy?

St. Paul took inventory of his blessed life—all of his distinctions, all the privileges he had from birth, and every one of the achievements he attained through sweat and hard work. Paul *truly* had a lot to be proud of.

“Rubbish,” he called it.

You see, Paul got in touch with his gratitude for the love of Jesus Christ in his life, and he became inspired to deepen *his devotion* to Christ even more. Paul—like Mary—decided to pour it on! Paul—like Mary—decided not to hold back. “I press on,” Paul says, “*because* Christ Jesus has *made me his own*.”

So, here’s the other thing in this Gospel lesson that I want you to notice. It’s not just about money. It’s also about *time*. And *both* of those things are limited. *Both*—time and money—are valuable.

Mary grasped this profound truth in a way that Judas did not. Time was short, and he could not see it...or maybe he *refused* to see it. Maybe, like us, he distracted himself from the heart of the matter, because it is *so easy* and tempting to do.

In my Wednesday night homily, I spoke about the Hebrew word, *khesed*. It shows up about 250 times in the Old Testament, often to describe the love of God. Unfortunately, our modern English has just about succeeded in turning the word ‘love’ into a feeling, but the biblical understanding of love means *loyalty*—intense loyalty, unswerving devotion, steadfast commitment, and deep, deep, faithfulness.

So, when you take full stock of the *khesed* of God, so beautifully revealed in the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ; you’re very likely to discover a deep, heartfelt gratitude.

And then, when you start to realize that time is short—*that* is when you stop holding back...that is when you begin to think and speak and act a lot less like Judas and a whole lot more like Mary. That is when you decide to *show* your love and gratitude and devotion to Jesus. \$25,000 worth of perfume? *Of course you pour it on!*

Dear people, what are we holding back...from our devotion to Jesus? And *why is that?* Are we judging other peoples' devotion or lack thereof? Are we just distracting ourselves from the heart of the matter?

The Good News in today's Gospel story is that we get to choose how we want to relate to Jesus...and to other people. We get to choose between judgment like Judas or devotion like Mary.

Don't get distracted, our time *is* limited. Our time is as short as theirs was. So, for goodness' sake, express your love...*now*, while you can. Express your loyalty to God with gratitude for God's '*khesed* loyalty' to us. And while you're at it, express your love to other people—with kindness, mercy, and forgiveness.

Time is short, so for goodness' sake, give *generously*—or at least make some specific plans to give generous gifts...*now*, while you can. Show your devotion to God—not just with thoughts or words, but with action. And while you're at it, show your devotion to other people, especially the poor—the *other* beloved children of God—sisters and brothers who will always be with us.

Y'all, "the LORD *has done* great things for us."

So, be thankful...and *then*...act on it, like Mary did. Don't hold back. When it comes to your devotion to Christ, don't be afraid to *pour it on!*

Amen.