

LIFE IN CHRIST: LIFE IN LAVISH DEVOTION

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John 12:1-8

One of my all-time favorite stories is *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. That story was first published in 1843. Yes, I am well aware that we are presently in the season of Lent and this is the first official week of Spring and I am talking about a story set at Christmas. But, I argue that you can enjoy this story any time of year.

At the heart of the story is its unforgettable character, Ebenezer Scrooge. And one has to admire the way that Dickens portrays him. In the English language, Scrooge's name alone has become a synonym for miserliness. At the beginning of the story, describing Scrooge, Dickens writes, "Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster."

As we know, on Christmas Eve Scrooge is visited by three ghosts who show him what his life has been like, what his life is in the present, and how his life will end. Because of the way that he has treated people, he will die alone and despised. These visits from the ghosts force Scrooge to assess his attitude and he changes from his cold, stingy ways to become someone who is warm and caring and generous to all. At the end of the story, Dickens writes, "[Scrooge] became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew..."

In Ebenezer Scrooge we witness two beings—one who is stingy and selfish and another who is giving and selfless.

We see a similar dichotomy in today's reading from John's gospel. On the one hand, we find Mary who tenderly anoints Jesus with a precious perfume, and on the other, we have Judas who objects to Mary's display of devotion.

Mary and her sister Martha and their brother Lazarus are close friends of Jesus. We have already been told how much Jesus loves this family. The siblings reside in the village of Bethany which is just a mile-and-a-half east of Jerusalem. In the chapter preceding today's reading, we read the account of Jesus raising Lazarus from death. Lazarus had become extremely sick and his sisters send word to Jesus. Despite the fact that the Jewish officials are actively searching for him, Jesus heads to Bethany. But he is too late. Lazarus dies before he arrives. When Jesus enters the village Martha says to him, *Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.* However, she adds, *But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.* Jesus goes to the tomb where Lazarus had been placed and directs that the door be opened. Martha points out that Lazarus has been dead for four

days and that there is going to be a stench. Jesus calls to Lazarus and Lazarus emerges from the tomb.

Our reading for today falls shortly after this story. Jesus has left Bethany and then returned. We are informed that Passover is now just six days away. It will be this Passover that Jesus has his last meal with his disciples. On that night Judas will hand Jesus to the authorities.

In Bethany, Mary's family hosts a dinner in Jesus' honor. Martha serves the food and Lazarus sits at the table with Jesus.

Can you imagine how awkward that could be. You've been invited to the dinner and you are trying to make small talk. You say, "Lazarus, you're looking good." And he replies, "I've been worse."

During this meal, Mary enters the room carrying a jar containing perfume. We are told that she has brought a pound of this expensive perfume which is made from pure nard. Nard—also known as spikenard—is an aromatic oil derived from the rhizomes of a flowering plant that grows at high altitudes in the Himalayan Mountains of Nepal, China, and India. It is not native to Israel. The amount of this perfume that Mary possesses costs three hundred denarii. Given that a denarius is a day's wage for a laborer, that would calculate to about \$18,000 worth of perfume.

Then Mary does something that astounds everyone. She approaches Jesus and begins to pour this perfume on his feet, and then she wipes his feet with her hair. As she does so, the powerful fragrance of the perfume permeates the house.

What is Mary doing and why does she do this? Why does she take such an expensive substance and pour it out on Jesus' feet?

In this season of Lent and Easter, I am preaching this sermon series that I have titled *Life in Christ*. Each week I will look at one of the passages from scripture that we associate with Lent and Easter and ask what it tells us about living as Christian believers, about living in Christ. Last week, I talked about how we as Christians live in covenant with God. God initiated the great covenant with Abraham—a covenant fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Yet, on the other side of the covenant, we, as a people, sinned and broke that covenant. Yet, God substituted himself for us and took our punishment upon himself and gave his life so that we might live. As Christians, to live in covenant means that we live as recipients of God's grace.

In our reading today from John's gospel, Mary does what she does as an act of lavish devotion. Remember, Mary and her siblings were already close friends with Jesus. When Lazarus became ill, Jesus was the one they called. But then, Lazarus does die and it is Jesus who calls him from the tomb back to life.

But what Mary does is more than simply pour expensive perfume on Jesus. What she does is anoint him. The act of anointing was normally performed at the blessing of a king. A thousand years earlier, David the shepherd was anointed by the prophet Samuel and named king of Israel (1 Sam. 16:13). In Hebrew, the word messiah, and in Greek, the word Christ, both mean ‘anointed one.’

To those who knew Jesus well, he was king, he was the anointed one, he was the hope of a lost people. At the trial, Pilate will ask Jesus, *Are you the king of the Jews?* (18:33)—a question Jesus will neither confirm or deny. Later that day that Jesus will be placed on the cross.

Kings were not the only ones anointed. The dead were also anointed. Corpses were anointed with sweet-smelling oils as preparation for burial. When Judas objects to Mary using up the expensive perfume, Jesus says to him, *Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.* Jesus knows that his burial is only a few days away. Mary may not realize it, but she is anointing Jesus not just as king but for his death as well.

As we read in the passage, Judas objects to Mary’s wasting something so valuable. He argues, *Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?* While that sounds noble, we’ve just been told that Judas is the one who will betray Jesus and that he is also a thief. He has been stealing from the disciples’ bank account. He doesn’t care about the poor at all, just the cash.

And this is where we found ourselves in this Lenten season. Are we Judas or are we Mary? By Judas, I don’t mean a thief or a betrayer, but a person who cannot imagine loving someone as much as Mary loves Jesus. As a believer in Jesus, Mary does not just wash Jesus’ feet, she anoints them with expensive perfume. And she doesn’t just dab it on, she pours out the entire jar—all she has. And then she wipes it up with her hair. This is an act not just of love, but of extravagance. She gives her wealth, she humbles herself and hands over her power, she gives a part of herself in an unrestrained expression of devotion to her Lord. She becomes vulnerable in an act that will provide the neighbors with gossip for months—“Can you believe what she did?” Mary is everything that Judas is not, and that, possibly, is why Judas speaks out. He, after all, is one of the twelve, chosen by Jesus, but even he is unable to display such lavish devotion.

The question for us today is this: ‘As we live in Christ are we doing so with lavish devotion?’ Are we like Judas (and like early Scrooge) counting our pennies and carefully calculating the cost of our love not wanting to go over budget? Do we claim to be a follower of Christ, but can’t imagine being inconvenienced by him? Do we measure out what we believe to be enough but no more?

As we consider the cost, let us not forget what Christ has given us. He gives his life. We tend to overlook the anguish and horror of Jesus' death because we know of the resurrection that will come. We overlook the pain and the sacrifice he suffered as he gave his life so that we might have life anew. Our devotion should match his sacrifice. To live in Christ means that we should love Christ fully and without hesitation or reserve. We should be like Mary (and the reformed Ebenezer Scrooge)—loving without concern for the cost, pouring out the sweet-smelling perfume of life so that it fills the house and drives away the stench of death.

In these weeks before Easter, I urge you to practice lavish devotion toward our Christ. Love without hesitation; give without reservation; worship without fear.

Amen.