

The couple enjoyed hosting dinner parties and they did it often. They put a great deal of time and creativity into planning the menu, shopping for the food and preparing the dishes. The table was carefully set with their best dishes, silverware, linen tablecloths and napkins. The centerpiece was often created from the flowers and plants that grew in their yard. The wines were chosen with great care.

Many of their friends, some whom even attended, thought all their planning and preparation was excessive and a waste of time and money. But for this couple it was an opportunity to express their appreciation for their friends and they really loved their time together planning and preparing these dinner parties.

Today's Bible story is similar in that some people saw what Mary did as foolish waste, while others saw it as extravagant love. What do you think? What's your take?

Those who thought Jesus wouldn't come to the Passover because of the death threats on his life were mistaken. The time the Father had set for his Son's sacrifice as the Passover Lamb was a week away.

Jesus is in Bethany, the hometown of his good friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus. The sisters and their brother had returned to their daily routines since Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Although, it's hard to imagine their lives ever being routine again. The presence of your living and breathing brother was a daily reminder of the power and mercy of Jesus.

Matthew and Mark include this account in their Gospels. Both identify the location of the dinner in Bethany. It was Simon the leper's house. So, a man healed from an incurable disease is hosting this dinner. A man brought back from the dead is in attendance. And the one responsible for both of those miracles is the guest of honor.

There were at least 15 men at the dinner table (12 Apostles, plus Simon, plus Lazarus, plus Jesus) when Mary opened the expensive jar of perfume she had purchased and began pouring it on Jesus' feet. By anointing Jesus' feet, Mary showed her humility. This task was reserved for servants. But Mary didn't stop there! She used her hair as a towel on the feet of her Lord. The perfume Mary used was worth a whole year's wages. She was honoring her Lord with her best.

Peeking into our own hearts, can we say that we show humility, like Mary? It's hard to be humble when our self-important nature is in charge in our heart and life. Jesus' own disciples struggled with that. None of them offered to relieve Jesus of his foot-washing duties in that Upper Room on Maundy Thursday.

Still peeking into our own hearts, can we say that we honor Jesus with our best, like Mary? It's hard to share our valuable time, skills and money when our selfish nature is in charge in our heart and life. We want control of those areas and we want to use them when and how we see fit. While our God, the giver of those blessings, looks for us to share them with him and others.

John inserts this tiny detail to our story: **"The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume."** Why would John add this? Maybe to stir up our sense of smell? I imagine the response in that house was a lot like walking past the fragrance counter at Macy's. Some started to sneeze and cough. Some wrinkled up their noses because they didn't like the aroma. And some closed their eyes to savor its smell.

While that may be part of it, John really wanted to give us something prophetic. Through the years the Christian church has remembered Mary's faith-filled love in action, just as Jesus had predicted in Matthew's account: **"Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."** That's what we're today!

Now, you'd think these disciples of Jesus .... observers of his healing, students of his teachings and confessors of their Lord .... would applaud Mary's devotion to Jesus. Most did. But not all. Judas openly criticized Mary's actions as a foolish waste. She should have sold it and given the proceeds to help the poor.

It's hard to argue with Judas' logic. A wonderful gesture, yes, but was it necessary with how much good a year's wages could have done? Judas never cared about the poor. He blasted Mary for selfishly using the perfume on Jesus, when he selfishly wanted the perfume sold so he could keep the money for himself.

What do you call a person who says or does what's right, but their heart is all wrong? A hypocrite. And yet Jesus, who knew what was in Judas' heart now and who he would face in Gethsemane in less than a week allowed him to continue.

There's a lesson here for those concerned with hypocrites in the church. Some people refuse to join or even attend a Christian church because they claim: *"The church is full of hypocrites."* Sure, there may be hypocrites in a congregation, there were among Jesus' own disciples. But that doesn't empty the message of God's grace and forgiveness of its power that is spoken every time we gather. And besides, we can't read hearts.

There are others who belong to a Christian church and yet criticize other members as being hypocrites. Again, look at Jesus' own disciples. And again, we can't read hearts. And again, that doesn't change the power and importance of God's Word and our use of the Sacraments in the church. We need to worship our Savior and serve him by bringing our best to honor him. Ultimately, God will expose hypocrites in his time.

Mary's humble and generous act was without a doubt extravagant love. It certainly wasn't a foolish waste, because Jesus steps in to defend what she did: **"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."**

What did Jesus mean by that? Had Mary purchased the perfume to anoint Jesus' body during his burial? No. Mary wasn't at the foot of the cross or the tomb. And, Jesus wasn't anointed at his burial and knew he wouldn't be.

Mary purchased the perfume and used it at this dinner which honored Jesus because she saw that Jesus would soon die and be buried, so she anointing him before his burial.

How interesting - Mary clearly saw and fully understood the mission of Jesus. Something his 12 disciples didn't. God gave Mary that insight through the words of Jesus. Remember how Martha criticized her sister for sitting and listened to Jesus instead of helping her? Jesus had commended her eager listening.

Mary had used the perfume to anoint Jesus. It was a display of extravagant love, since Jesus wouldn't always be around in person with them. The poor would always be around, so there would always be opportunities to help the poor.

Have you expressed your extravagant love for Jesus lately? You knew you *"anoint"* Jesus too when you honor him, didn't you?

- It's never a foolish waste when you honor him by worshiping him with believing and grateful hearts ... in-person or online.
- It's never a foolish waste when you honor him by regularly reading your Bible, or pondering devotions.
- It's never a foolish waste when you honor him by obeying his Word in your life and his will for your life.
- It's never a foolish waste when you honor him by generously give back from the time, skills and money he's invested in you.

Today's Bible Story is about spiritual priorities. Jesus comes first. We aren't foolishly wasting our time, skills and money when we use them to honor and worship our Savior.