

John 11:28-37; 12:1-8, Jesus Prefers Perfume ¹

Before the lesson: Create small (two-inch by two-inch) pieces of cloth. Squirt perfume on them then put one each in separate ziplock plastic bags. Hand them out as the transformative exercise.)

Fellowship Question: (Use *one* of these to break the ice, to begin some discussion, and to lead into the study):

Do you have your funeral plans made?

When you die, do you want your “remains” to be buried in a simple box, an elaborate piece of furniture or to be cremated?

Information

Most of us probably don't want to spend a lot of time thinking about our deaths or our funeral plans. Funeral directors and grief counselors encourage us to do so. Their experience with many families' suffering has let them know that the time of loss (especially a sudden loss) is not a good time for a family to plan a service or to guess what their loved one may have wanted. Nevertheless, we put it off, probably because we are in denial that death will happen to us (any time soon, anyway).

Jesus has been telling his disciples that he is going to die soon. They are in denial. Why do you think Jesus' disciples cannot or will not believe what Jesus says about his impending death? [Jesus is young and healthy; Jesus is at the peak of popularity; if Jesus dies, the last three years are a waste; if Jesus dies, hopes for a Jewish revolution over Roman governmental dominance dies with him; they love him and don't want to imagine life without him, etc.]

The disciples have seen Jesus heal severely ill persons and even raise Lazarus from the dead. If Jesus had such power, maybe they imagined that Jesus would never die. The thought may have been, if Jesus were present, death was vanquished.

- Have a class member read John 11:28-37.

Lazarus has died. Jesus asks to see Mary, Lazarus' sister. She leaves the house to meet with him in the place he had been speaking with Martha, her sister. How do you imagine Mary felt when she got the private message, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you”?

When Mary reaches Jesus, what posture does she take? How do you interpret this posture? [Worship? Grief? Exhaustion?]

We can see in Mary's words to Jesus her belief that Jesus could have healed her brother if only Jesus had been present. What tone of voice do you think Mary is using as she addresses Jesus? What do you think was going on in Mary's spirit?

¹ This lesson is copyrighted by Dr. Rick Jordan, Great Bible Teachers, Inc., 2023. More lessons may be found at greatbibleteachers.com.

As the story progresses, we know that Jesus did finally raise Lazarus from the dead. Because of this healing, some of the key leaders of the Pharisees began to plot Jesus' death. Because of this threat, Jesus and his disciples lay low in a town near the desert. (John 11:45-54) If Jesus knew he was going to die, why was he lying low? [Fear? Not the right time or place? etc.]

The Passover was coming, a time when entire families would travel to Jerusalem to celebrate the biggest religious ceremony of their faith. Although there were rumors that Jesus would not attend this year's Passover because of threats against his life, Jesus was on his way. He went to Bethany and raised Lazarus. Bethany was a short two miles away from Jerusalem.

Now, the week before Passover, Jesus and his disciples are visiting the home of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. Here we have "the final scene of the public ministry of Jesus."²

- Have a class member read John 12:1-3.

We see Mary as a central character in this story, as well. What is Mary's posture in this story? What do you imagine is going on in her spirit at this time?

We recognize John's Gospel of the Gospel of Abundance. The house-filling scent of this expensive perfume is another example of the "more abundant life" that believers have.

"Like the air that carries it, fragrance also evokes the Spirit: encompassing and edgeless; spreading unpredictably and crossing boundaries; connecting with potent memories and deep relationships."³

"The narrative stresses not only the perfume's cost and abundance, but also the luxuriousness of Mary's act: the perfume's fragrance filled the whole house, in contrast with the stench of decay about which Martha warned Jesus at Lazarus's tomb. Although Mary's act prepares Jesus for his burial, his death will not lead to the decay of his body, but to his resurrection. In an oblique way the perfume's fragrance suggests that Jesus would not experience corruption but would be raised to life and to the glory he has had with his Father."⁴

"Nard was the main ingredient of the perfume that was used in making the consecrated incense, the Ketoret. This was the incense offered on the altar of the First and Second Temples. John had already spoken of the body of the crucified and resurrected Jesus as the Temple (2:21)."⁵

"Mary's loosened hair could be understood both as a sign of intimacy and as a customary indication of mourning. As she wipes Jesus's feet with her hair, she too becomes an anointed one

² David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 230.

³ Ford, 233.

⁴ Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 259.

⁵ Ford, 233, quoting a personal communication of Richard Chartres.

who exudes and spreads the *pistike* fragrance that symbolizes faith. '...Pistike, translated in the NRSV as 'pure' is cognate with *pisteuein* ('believe, trust, have faith')."⁶

The Greek is not clear to commentators whether Mary poured out all of the perfume or most of the perfume but kept some back for a later purpose.

"'She has kept' ... is probably the correct *interpretation*. The idea is not that she is to keep the perfume for future use, but that (unknowingly) she was keeping it until now to embalm Jesus. ... This interpretation would agree with Mark 14:3 where the woman breaks the jar so that there is no perfume left, and thus there can be no question of keeping some for future use. This also explains Judas' indignation - all the valuable perfume has been used."⁷

Whether Mary used all or some of the perfume, there was at least one person who was upset that she was expending any of it.

- Have a class member read John 12:4-8.

Judas values the perfume at three hundred denarii. "If one denarius is regarded as a day's wage (Mt. 20:2), then this perfume was with about a year's wages...Mary's is an exorbitant expenditure."⁸

Compare Mary's motivations with Judas' motivations. [Write Mary/Judas on the board. Jot characteristics as class members share them.]

What does the perfume represent to Mary? To Judas?

"Judas tries to establish a situation of either/or love: either you love Jesus or you love the poor. Jesus refutes Judas by affirming the kind of both/and love Mary has shown: one can love both Jesus and the poor."⁹

"Throughout John, Judas epitomizes those who have fallen away: if they had once believed in Jesus, they do so no longer. Judas thus stands in contrast to Mary: she spends generously what she has to honor Jesus, while Judas greedily grasps what does not belong to him. Mary honors Jesus; Judas betrays him."¹⁰

"At his death, Jesus will be anointed in secret by men who are afraid to make public their faith (19:38-39). In this story, Mary unashamedly anoints Jesus in front of all who dined with him.

⁶ Ford, 234, quoting Margaret Daly-Denton, *David in the Fourth Gospel: The Johannine Reception of the Psalms*, *Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums* 47, Leiden: Brill, 2000.

⁷ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel of John*. The Anchor Bible, Volume 29 (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 449.

⁸ Thompson, 260.

⁹ Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds., *The Woman's Bible Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 299.

¹⁰ Thompson, 261.

Mary's declaration for Jesus is not deferred until after his death but is offered to Jesus while he lives... [footwashing] Mary does for Jesus now what Jesus will do for his disciples later."¹¹

The side-by-side comparison of these two followers of Jesus is stunning. Both knew Jesus well. Both had followed Jesus for years. Both had heard Jesus say, over and over, that he must soon die. What made one a faithful follower and the other a betrayer?

Transformational exercise

[Pass the plastic bag with perfume-sprayed sections of cloth. Be prepared to read slowly John 12:1-3, 7]

We do not know the scent of Mary's perfume. Probably it was not this scent. But as I re-read this passage to you, close your eyes and imagine being an observer of this scene. When I come to the part about Mary bringing out her perfume, lift the cloth toward your nose. Smell the cloth and imagine that smell filling a room. After I have read the passage, I will close in prayer. You may keep the cloth as a reminder during the rest of Lent of this beautiful love of Mary for her friend, Jesus.

Close in a prayer something like this: Lord, help us to be more like Mary, your friend who loved you enough to pay attention to your words. May we be less like Judas, who paid attention only to his own wants. Amen.

¹¹ Newsom and Ringe, 299.