

Scent From a Broken Vase

John 12:1-11

Introduction

O. Henry, the master of the short story, wrote a moving tale of a young couple named Della and Jim. They were extremely poor, yet very much in love. Each had one unique possession. Della's hair was her glory and, when she let it down, it almost served as a robe. Jim had a gold watch which had come to him from his father and was his pride.

It was the day before Christmas, and Della had exactly one dollar and eighty seven cents to buy a present for Jim. She decided to do something out of love for him, so she went and had her hair cut and sold. With the twenty dollars, she bought a platinum chain for his precious watch.

When Jim came home that night and saw Della's big smile, but close cropped hair, he stopped as if stupefied. Slowly he handed her his gift. It was an expensive pair of tortoise shell combs with jeweled edges for Della's hair. But Della had sold her hair to buy a chain for Jim's gold pocket watch – the gold pocket watch that he had sold to buy the combs.

Each had given the other all there was to give.

Today, we begin a study of the most momentous week in human history. It is the passion week that will soon culminate in the trial, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The week opens with an expression of love so intense that, two thousand years later, we are still talking about it. It is found in the gospel by John, in chapter 12. Let us begin at verse 1.

Jesus, therefore, six days before the Passover, came to Bethany where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.

Matthew informs us, in chapter 26, verse 6, that this meal took place in the home of Simon the leper – a man Jesus evidently healed.

In a moment, Mary will break open a perfume jar, but already the air is filled with the aroma of thanksgiving and joy. You can see it on everyone's faces; you can almost feel it in the air!

Character Sketches

You will notice another familiar character buzzing about. Notice verse 2.

So they made Him a supper there, and Martha was serving; but Lazarus was one of those reclining at the table with Him.

Martha – the scent of a diligent worker

1. We are re-introduced to Martha – the diligent worker.

Martha could say, "I can't do a lot of things, but buddy, I can cook!"

I can just see her with her apron on, her sleeves rolled up, pushing a stray wisp of hair off her perspiring forehead. She does not keep expensive perfume, but she knows perspiration.

The question is, "What can you do?"

Marsha and I shared lunch with three other couples, recently. It was a luncheon held at the church and was prepared by a couple of very hardworking ladies. The luncheon gave us an

opportunity to talk, to laugh, and even to get teary eyed with a group of believers who are part of our family.

I will never forget one lady sharing that, when she was only five years old, her mother had died. She remembered that her mother used to describe to her what heaven was like, as they walked along a creek bank and picked wildflowers. That was a challenge to us all!

We were talking about how each couple met one another, and the man who had been married the longest of us all, laughingly said, “The only thing my wife and I have in common is that we were married on the same day!”

That was encouraging to us all.

How was this time made possible? By two women, who kept food coming and made a delicious meal for us to enjoy.

Lazarus – the scent of a faithful witness

2. Next, we are introduced to another character in this story. It is Lazarus – the faithful witness.

Notice verse 2 again.

So they made Him a supper there, and Martha was serving; but Lazarus was one of those reclining at the table with Him.

In John, chapter 11, we studied him being brought back to life.

I saw, on the television show, “20/20,” a woman who supposedly died and went to heaven. She mysteriously will not turn over her medical records to substantiate her claim. The country, however, is still fascinated enough to take the witness of someone, suspicious as they may be, because she died and came back to life. She said she saw heaven and could answer questions that you might have about the afterlife. And, she was making a lot of money doing it.

Imagine Lazarus’s market value. If Lazarus were living today, he would be booked, for months in advance, on talk shows; publishers would be clamoring for the rights to his book; he could travel the world giving his testimony of being dead, not for four seconds or four minutes, but for four days.

And what a witness he was! Look at verses 10 and 11.

But the chief priests took counsel that they might put Lazarus to death also; because on account of him many of the Jews were going away, and were believing in Jesus.

By the way, you discover, in these verses, the key difference between the words of the woman I saw on television and the testimony of Lazarus. The woman stated things such as, “I discovered we all have the divine within us . . .” and other New Age rhetoric. After Lazarus finished speaking, people came to place their faith, not in the existence of the paranormal, the afterlife, the spiritual realm, but in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And they were being saved by the scores. In fact, there was such a mass movement occurring with Jews leaving Judaism, that the leaders really began to get upset.

From the Jewish leaders’ point of view, they could accuse Jesus of blasphemy because He claimed equality with God. But Lazarus had done nothing of the kind. He had just died and Jesus had raised him from the dead. They wanted Lazarus dead, simply because he was a living, undeniable witness to Jesus’ power and claim.

Now, abruptly, out of nowhere, Mary appears and does something that is still a topic of conversation, over two thousand years later. Continue to verse 3.

Mary therefore took a pound of very costly perfume of pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

Mary – the scent of a transparent worshiper

3. Here is Mary – the transparent worshiper.

Actually, if you combine the three gospel accounts, you discover that she poured some ointment on His head and the remainder on his feet!

Three results of Mary’s Worship

Three things happened simultaneously!

A subtle recognition of . . .

1. First, this act was a subtle recognition of Christ’s death and burial.

Did you know that, of these faithful women, Mary of Bethany was not one of the women who went to the

tomb to anoint the body of Jesus? In a sense, Mary was showing the coming death of the Lord.

But think about this, she was giving Him flowers while He was still alive. She was not putting flowers on His grave, she was putting them in His hands!

Question #1 – What are you giving . . .

That leads me to question number one – what are you giving away before it is too late?!

The private use of nard was the perfuming of the deceased. It was an expression of love for the one who had died.

But Mary is not waiting to express her love. How about you?!

An symbolic honor recognizing . . .

2. Secondly, this act was an symbolic honor recognizing Christ's royalty.

The public purpose or use of nard was the anointing of a new king. Mary was anointing Jesus as her kingly Messiah.

When Mary anointed the head of Jesus, she was performing a symbolic ritual that recognized the royalty of her Lord. She was crowning Him King.

But, when she came to the feet of Jesus, Mary took the place of a slave. To a Jewish woman, her hair was her glory, so when Mary undid her hair, she laid her glory at His feet.

A selfless example of . . .

3. Finally, this act was a selfless example of unrestricted generosity.

Look at verse 3 again.

Mary therefore took a pound [pint] of very costly perfume of pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

You have heard about the simplified 1040 Tax Form. It contains only two lines of content. The first line is the question, "How much money did you make last year?"

Then, the second line reads, "Send it in."

Not even the most ardent patriot, who is ready to do just about anything for his country, will send in

everything he makes. That would be extravagant patriotism!

What you are about to see, is a woman, named Mary, pour her fortune on a pair of dusty feet! It was extravagance beyond words!

John, in this verse, calls the ointment "pure" – undiluted!

The ointment was made from a herb that grew in the mountains of India and it was imported in white, alabaster bottles. This expensive imported liquid was often passed down from family to family as an heirloom. It carried such value that people used it for investment purposes, as gold is often used today.

According to John, chapter 12, verse 5, this one pound, or pint, was worth three hundred denarii. That was the average one year income of a working man. In today's economy, it would be worth twenty five thousand dollars! This was, indeed, liquid gold.

Now, when you give yourself lavishly, openly, transparently, fervently to the Lord, you are going to be misunderstood and criticized. Even people within the family will criticize and misunderstand.

At this point, the scene is interrupted by a pious hypocrite named Judas. Verse 5 has his first recorded words in the gospel accounts.

Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii, and given to the poor people?

There is no evidence that Judas ever gave to the poor! His objection was actually a smoke screen to cover his own selfish hypocrisy. But Judas steps up and says, "Waste! Why wasn't this sold and given to the poor?"

By the way, if you decide to abandon your life, and talent, and money, and plans, to the glory of God – there will be those who will cry, "Waste! Fanatic!"

It is interesting that, as John writes, he adds the commentary that eventually, everyone found out. Continue to verse 6.

Now he said this, not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it.

He was a thief, or in the Greek, a "kleptes," from which we get our word "kleptomaniac". He was upset

that this treasure was not given to his control so that he could line his own pockets.

Notice the contrast – Mary gave it all; Judas wanted to keep it all!

Jesus quickly stepped up to her defense, in verses 7 and 8.

Jesus therefore said, “Let her alone, in order that she may keep it for the day of My burial. For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have Me.”

In Mark, chapter 14, verse 6,

. . . Jesus said, “Leave her alone; why do you bother her? She has done a good deed to me.”

The point is, when we think of what really impresses God, we immediately think of vocational ministry – and if you are not a missionary, or a pastor, or an evangelist you are second rate.

No! Mary was not any of these, professionally.

Question #2 – What is it . . .

That leads me to the second important question – what is it that God has given you to give away?!

Mary did have a vase filled with precious ointment. Judas had already calculated that that little vase was worth a year’s salary, or around twenty five thousand dollars in our economy. It was her most precious possession!

What has God given you to give away?! It could be money, or a talent, or a gift. What about teaching, singing, speaking, or leading? What about hospitality, or encouragement, or service?

It is much easier for us to think, “Okay, Lord, I’ll burn out for you in one magnificent blaze of glory. Strike up the band, here I come!”

It is altogether different to say, “Lord, I’ll be willing to sizzle through the daily disciplines of Christianity. I’ll be willing to risk criticism by witnessing to the unimpressed. I’ll be willing to give money to your church with no strings attached. I’ll be willing to teach a group of runny nose, hyperactive kids. I’ll be willing to pray regularly for our missionaries and send them notes of encouragement.”

What kind of alabaster vase are you willing to break open?! What has God given you to give away?!

Question #3 – Who needs . . .

Question number three then, is – who needs what you have to give away?!

There might be a business associate who needs your witness; a single mom who needs your encouragement; there might be a kid, that you have noticed, whose father is rarely home – he needs an hour of basketball in your back yard. The list is endless.

I was preaching in a church about Christian service, recently, and an elderly lady came up to me afterward. She said, “I’m eighty six years old and I have several physical maladies that don’t allow me to do much. But I want you to know that God has blessed my ministry of writing to four federal prisoners. I’m writing criminals regularly about the Lord Jesus.”

What are you giving away? Have you looked around to see who needs you?!

I read about a fifth grade school teacher, named Miss Thompson. She was a terrific teacher, but, of course, she was human and there were students she just did not seem to click with.

Teddy Stallard was a boy that Miss Thompson really did not care for. He was not interested in school. He had a blank expression on his face and his eyes had a glassy, unfocused appearance. When she spoke to Teddy, he always answered in monosyllables. His clothes were dirty and his hair was unkempt. He was not an attractive boy and he was not liked by the other students either.

She should have known better; she had Teddy’s records and knew more about him than she wanted to admit. The records read:

- 1st Grade: Teddy shows promise with his work and attitude, but poor home situation.
- 2nd Grade: Teddy could do better. Mother is seriously ill. He receives little help at home.
- 3rd Grade: Teddy is a good boy, but too serious. He is a slow learner. His mother died this year.
- 4th Grade: Teddy is very slow, but well-behaved. His father shows no interest.

Christmas came and the boys and girls in Miss Thompson’s class brought her Christmas presents. They piled their presents on her desk and crowded around to watch her open them. Among the presents, there was one from Teddy Stallard. She was surprised that he had brought her a gift, but he had.

Teddy's gift was wrapped in brown paper and was held together with Scotch tape. On the paper were written the simple words, "For Miss Thompson from Teddy."

When she opened Teddy's present, out fell a rhinestone bracelet, with half the stones missing, and a bottle of inexpensive perfume. The other boys and girls began to giggle and smirk over Teddy's gifts, but Miss Thompson, at least, had the sense to silence them by immediately putting on the bracelet and applying some of the perfume on her wrist. Holding her wrist up for the children to smell, she said, "Doesn't it smell lovely?" and the children agreed.

At the end of the day, when school was over and the other children had left, Teddy lingered behind. He slowly came over to her desk and said softly, "Miss Thompson, you smell just like my mother . . . and her bracelet looks real pretty on you too."

When Teddy left, Miss Thompson got down on her knees and asked God to forgive her. The next day, when the children came to school, they were welcomed by a new teacher. Miss Thompson had become a different person – now not just a teacher, but an agent of God, committed to loving her children. She helped all the children, but she began to pay attention to the slow ones, and especially, Teddy Stallard. By the end of that school year, Teddy showed dramatic improvement. He had caught up with most of the students and was even ahead of some.

The next year she did not see much of Teddy . . . and months blended into years. Then, one day, she received a note that read,

Dear Miss Thompson,

I wanted you to be the first to know. I will be graduating from high school second.

Love, Teddy Stallard

Four years later, another note came,

Dear Miss Thompson,

They just told me I will be graduating first in my class. I wanted you to be the first to know.

The university has not been easy, but I liked it.

Love, Teddy Stallard

Four years later, another note read,

Dear Miss Thompson,

As of today, I am Theodore Stallard, M.D. How about that? I wanted you to be the first

to know. I am getting married next month, the 26th to be exact. I want you to come and sit where my mother would sit if she were alive. You are the only family I have.

Love, Teddy Stallard

So, Miss Thompson went to the wedding and sat where Teddy's mother would have sat.

She deserved to sit there, because, years earlier, she had broken a vase and poured out love on a little kid.

Did you notice the effect of Mary's gift; in fact, the effect of all four gifts? They are:

- *Simon* – gave Jesus the gift of hospitality – Jesus was able to relax and enjoy fellowship with his friends.
- *Martha* – gave Jesus the gift of a meal – Jesus was able to eat and be strengthened at, perhaps, His only peaceful meal.
- *Lazarus* – gave Jesus the gift of true friendship – he was one of the few who would be willing, at this early stage, to allow his name to be on the Pharisees "hit list".
- *Mary* – gave Jesus the gift of worship – Jesus was so moved that He promised that, wherever the gospel was told, people would hear about her deed of sacrificial worship.

By the way, did you notice an immediate benefit of her act? Look back at verse 3b.

. . . and the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

Now it may have spread around all by itself, of course, but on the other hand, if Mary was helping to serve, as I am sure she was, since this precious perfume was now mingled in her hair – everywhere she went, anytime she moved, the fragrance of her act of worship permeated everything.

When you worship the Lord; when you are willing to snap the bottle neck and let the contents of your life pour out before the Lord, you, also, will be a fragrant blessing to everyone who comes in contact with you.

Matthew's account of this story adds one verse. Chapter 26, verse 13,

Truly I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done shall also be spoken of in memory of her.

Question #4 – What are you going . . .

Now the last question, number four – what are you going to be remembered for?!

Once, when Alfred Nobel was reading the newspaper, he saw that, by accident, the editor had believed a rumor that he had died and had actually published his obituary. The headline read something like, “Father of Dynamite Dies”. He read the accompanying article that told of his discoveries with nitroglycerin and his patents, in both England and America, for dynamite. Then the phrase caught his eye, “Alfred Nobel will be remembered for creating the potential for mass destruction.”

That so challenged him that he immediately made plans for a trust, through the Bank of Sweden, and created, what would become, the Nobel Prize – for physics, chemistry, physiology and medicine, literature, and interestingly, peace.

So, when you hear the name Alfred Nobel, you do not think of dynamite explosives, you think of the Nobel prize.

What will you be remembered as?! A generation from now, what will be your lasting legacy? What will you have contributed?

It is always interesting, when you have young children and hear some expression of who they think you are. The other day, we were playing a game and one of my children wanted to change the rules when it was my turn, to make it a little easier. I asked, “Why?”

They said “‘Cause you’re so old!”

My son drew a picture of his family for his class. There was a sister, a brother and himself, then Mom and Dad. He drew me as this tall skinny man with a bald head that had just a little hair on both sides. It did not look anything like me!

This past Mother’s day, one of my sons made up for it, as he expressed in a note to his mother on why he loved her. He ended his note by writing,

I love my Mom because she cooks every meal of the day, buys my clothes and washes them as well, and most of all . . .

(get this)

. . . I love her because she married my Dad.

I promise I did not help him write that note! It sure made up for the easier rules and the funny drawing, though!

Our other son, with the help of his grandmother, who was keeping them while Marsha and I were at Liberty University, wrote a poem. This is how he would remember his mom!

Dear Mom, I love you a bunch,

‘cause you always make me such a good lunch.

Your taco salad is so good,

I would eat it all if I could.

You always look pretty and smell so nice,

I’m sorry that you are afraid of mice.

We both have dimples, like each other,

I am so glad you are my mother.

This is a broken vase.

Ladies and gentlemen, when you pour yourself out for God; when you give your life over for the glory of God – whether it is sending letters of encouragement or praying; fixing lunches or writing poems; teaching Sunday school or donating funds, you are breaking vases and filling your world with precious aroma. Like:

- Martha – who was a tireless worker;
- Lazarus – who was the faithful witness;
- Mary – whose gift of worship filled the air with what she could have kept to herself!

When you break your vase, you can no longer hold anything inside – it will all pour out – for what really matters; for what really lasts. Ask the questions:

- What are you giving away before it is too late?
- What has God given you to give away?
- Who needs what you have to give away?

These will answer the question:

- What are you going to be remembered for?

Know that your gifts will be remembered. Solomon wrote, in Proverbs, chapter 10, verse 7a,

The memory of the righteous is blessed . . .

You will be remembered, maybe not to the extent of a Mary, but, one day, you and I will stand before the Lord and receive rewards for the way we lived –

for our work, our worship, our witness – and we will
discover then, that God remembered everything.

He remembered everything!

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