

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, Wash.
March 14, 2010**

Matthew 26:6-13

Lenten Lessons from MARY OF BETHANY!

- 1. We gladly give our best to the One who gave His best**
- 2. We gladly give our best despite possible criticism**

Hymns: "Remember Your Love" – 125 – "A Purple Robe" – 111

Scripture quotations from the NIV

Matthew 26:6-13 –

While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table.

When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. "Why this waste?" they asked. "This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor."

Aware of this, Jesus said to them, "Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."

How many "Marys" are there in the New Testament? Perhaps there are more than you think!

There are no less than six of them. Since we are focusing on one of the "Marys" of the NT today, we'd better make sure we know which one this is! Here are the six Marys:

- Mary, the mother of Jesus
- Mary Magdalene
- Mary, the mother of the disciples James and Joseph
- Mary, the mother of the evangelist Mark
- Mary of Rome (mentioned once briefly in *Romans*)
- Mary of Bethany

This last one I mentioned is the Mary that we have before us today. She is the sister of Martha, the one who was too busy with the household chores one day to listen at Jesus' feet. She also is the sister of Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead. **Let's learn some valuable lessons from this account from Matthew where Mary gives a gift to Jesus!**

As we do this, we're happy we also have the account of this in the gospels of *Mark* and *John*, because they offer some additional facts that Matthew doesn't mention. We'll pull in some of those details as we discuss this story today.

1 – We read, "*Jesus was in Bethany in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper.*" The other Bible accounts fill in some details here. We can figure out pretty definitely that this incident happened on Saturday evening before Holy Week. Bethany was a village a few miles outside of Jerusalem, where Jesus had befriended the family of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. We might think of it as being as far as Buriem

from Des Moines. We hear that Jesus is at the home of Simon the Leper. We have no other references to this man in the Bible. We might be safe to assume that since Simon is among public people that Jesus had healed him. John tells us that a dinner was being given in Jesus' honor and that Martha was serving. He also tells us that Lazarus had a place at the table with Jesus and his disciples.

Then we read, "*A woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table.*" John's account tells us this woman was Mary. In their day they ate while lying on their side at the table. During this special dinner, Mary came with her alabaster jar of perfume, most likely broke the neck off, and poured it on Jesus' head. This anointing of his head honored Jesus. John mentions that she poured the perfume on his feet. This was an act of service in those dusty days. John also mentions that she then wiped his feet with her hair. This was quite an act of humility! A woman's hair was the crown of her glory, and women did not normally let their hair down in public.

This was not everyday perfume. Mark tells us it was a bottle of pure perfume from a plant called nard, a plant native to India. John mentions that it was a pound of perfume, which would be about a pint. Mark also tells us that the perfume was worth over a year's wages! Do you grasp that? Trying to compare it to today, we could say that this was perhaps a \$60,000 or \$80,000 jar of perfume. It was a tremendously expensive offering, and it was used up in a few minutes.

Does that leave some of you asking, "Why?" What would possess Mary to give this costly offering to Jesus? Jesus would later say that "*she did it to prepare me for burial.*" That statement leads to interesting

thoughts. Had Mary grasped Jesus' statements about his suffering and dying better than the disciples had grasped them? Had she listened at his feet to teachings and predictions he revealed, and understood and believed them better than others? This very well might be true. Mary could have been doing this to prepare Jesus for his mission of going to the cross for her sins and paying for them soon! There certainly would not be time after his death to anoint his body for burial. **The first reason Mary gave this offering to Jesus and did this for him was out of the love and thankfulness she felt for her Savior! It was not forced or commanded.**

2 Corinthians 8 tells us, "*You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.*" This is what moved Mary! The price he was going to pay at the cross for her was far more than the year's wages that the perfume cost her. She could see a living, breathing example of what to be thankful for in her own brother Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.

Another feeling Mary needed to have besides thanks was trust. She gave a \$60,000 or more offering to Jesus, and we're never told in the Bible that she was wealthy. She very likely knew what Malachi 3 tells us about giving to the Lord: "*Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,*" says the LORD Almighty, "*and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.*" The Lord promises to provide for his people, and Mary believed it! **She gladly gave her best to the One who gave His best.**

The example of Mary of Bethany is a timely lesson for us today. It's timely because of the unfortunate ways people sometimes view giving offerings to the Lord. I remember talking with a young couple many years ago that were going to get married in my former church. He was a member; she was not. In pre-marital counseling, the topic of money and contentment comes up, since this can be a divisive issue between married couples. We reviewed the fact that all our possessions are a gift from God. Then we discussed the four areas that the Bible tells us to support with our money:

- Our family obligations
- The needy
- The church
- The government

The young woman made an interesting comment that I'm sure she intended to be positive. She said, "Oh yes, we certainly would consider what we could give to the church if we have some money left over at the end of the month." I remember the comment vividly because I've revised the order that mention those four areas to be more accurate. The Bible speaks of the firstfruit offering being given to the Lord: "*Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops.*" (Proverbs 3:9) Our inclination is often like that young woman's, giving God the leftovers. Mary teaches us differently today!

What would possess us to give of our firstfruits? Not only the fact that it's a command of God, but **we also gladly give our best to the One who gave his best, as Mary did.** When we were dead in our sins, when we were lost in our guilt, and when we were on the road to destruction and hell, the Lord Jesus gave his all for us and put us first. He died for our sins by giving his very life! When we realize this, it affects us

forever. It reshapes the way we look at the things of this world. We have been singing in our offering hymn this Lent:

*Were the whole realm of nature mine
That were a tribute far too small
Love so amazing, so divine
Demands my soul, my life, my all*

Another fact that we need to note is the generosity of this gift. The question of how much to give to the Lord has been mulled over in many a Christian's mind down through time: "Should I tithe?" (A tithe is 10% of your income) What might a person think about that?

- Perhaps some people are glad they don't live in Old Testament times, when tithing was commanded by God. "Whew! I'm glad I can give less than 10%!" they think.
- Others say, "I suppose I should give a tithe because that was a good guideline for God's Old Testament people," although it doesn't seem so pleasant to them.
- Finally, other people look at the tithe as the starting point for giving offerings. This actually is the way God commanded his people to give in the OT. The tithe was automatic; yet there were other optional offerings that they could offer above the tithe.

Mary's example shows us a generosity that inspires us. 2 Corinthians 9:11 tells us, "*You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.*" Yet imagine giving an offering of \$60,000 to God! It almost staggers us. That may be as much as your cabin or your

camper! That may be as much as your truck or boat! That may be as much as all the electronics in your home!

Such a gift would display something about a believer:

- An attitude of trust that we can never outgive God. He has more resources than we ever will!
- A faith that God will provide for our needs. We trust him for the future and say along with the psalmist: *“I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread. They are always generous and lend freely; their children will be blessed.”* (Psalm 37)

This is an attitude that we have as a church as well:

- Having an excellent sanctuary with high ceilings, some with steeples that stretch toward heaven. Where is the function in that?
- We have silver vessels that are used for communion. Wouldn't glass or even Styrofoam do?
- We have a grand piano to accompany our music up front. Wouldn't the spinet piano in the Fellowship Hall be enough?
- Even more, we have a pipe organ that would cost around \$400,000 leading the main music for our services. Wouldn't just the grand piano do?

May our heart long for excellence in what we show toward our Lord, as Mary teaches us.

2 – The sermon today could end right now. It could end right here with this beautiful lesson in thankfulness and trust. In fact, I wish it could. But it's going to be five minutes longer because of the other incident we heard about in this account: *“When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. ‘Why this waste?’ they asked. ‘This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor.’”*

The disciples were not happy about the gift. John's account tells us that they were led by Judas. Judas brought up what he thought was a noble reason that this gift was out of place. What about the poor? Couldn't the money from this gift have been used in a more practical, worthwhile way? What a waste!

But John tells us more about Judas' comments. He writes, *“He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.”* Judas didn't have such a noble motive. He didn't even say this just because he was the treasurer, and was supposed to be “fiscally minded.” He said it because he was greedy and dishonest, and wanted to pocket the money for himself.

Can you imagine Mary's feelings when the disciples said this? Mark's account even says, *“They rebuked her harshly.”* Can you imagine the anticipation and excitement Mary had leading up to this gift? Can you imagine her heart pounding as she gave this unique gift to Jesus at this special dinner? And then she was criticized! What a “downer!”

Jesus scolds them. We read, *“Jesus said to them, ‘Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. When she*

poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial.' " After all, by their criticizing the worthiness of the gift, they were criticizing Jesus too when he was silent about it. But he tells them that this gift is proper. It is for his burial. They should stop criticizing!

In these last five minutes of the sermon, what lesson do we see for our lives? **We give our best despite possible criticism.**

Would there really be criticism for your generous gift? From Christians? Unfortunately, yes. This might happen in various ways:

- Your relative, who is even a Christian, finds out what you generally give to your church and says, "What in the world are you thinking, giving offerings like that?"
- Your neighbor finds out that you donated a new piano to the church or school, and says, "Why didn't you give them your old one, and keep the new one for yourself?"
- A church member says, "Why do you spend so much time serving in such-and-such an area? It's not worth that much of your time."
- Or, you have an idea for the church to spend money for a project or improvement, and it meets with criticism.

It is not wrong to think through spending resources. But when criticism comes because:

- Someone thinks it is a "waste" to spend money on something for the Lord,

- The motivation is selfishness because the money could be pocketed,
- There is a lack of trust that God will provide,

then the criticism is off base. May we never be deterred by such criticism that comes from those motives. **May we always be ready to give our best despite possible criticism!**

Finally, the closing words of Jesus are quite interesting, aren't they? He mentions that this account will be told in future years in memory of Mary. We certainly have done that today!

May we remember Mary of Bethany among the many Marys mentioned in the NT. May these two lessons not be forgotten by us:

- 1. We gladly give our best to the One who gave his best**
- 2. We gladly give our best despite possible criticism**

May God bless us in our personal lives and as a church as we always strive to show our love and thanks to him! For he has given us everything we need, especially salvation through his own Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.