

On March 17, 2013, Seminarian Nelson Grigg preached this sermon at Christ Church.

BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE

Lent 5 – Cycle C: John 12:1-8

Even though the Gospel reading from John is only eight verses in length, it is filled with many powerful messages. In the previous chapter, Jesus has just raised Lazarus from the dead, and now he has arrived at his house where Martha is once again preparing and serving the meal. Mary was at the feet of Jesus, as she was in Luke 10; but this time instead of listening to the teacher, she was anointing Jesus' feet with a perfume called nard.

Does anyone know where 'nard' comes from or what it is? Well, our friends at Wikipedia tell us that it is a flowering plant of the Valerian family that grows in the Himalayas of Nepal, China, and India at an altitude of 3,000 to 5,000 meters. The underground stems are crushed and distilled into an intensely aromatic amber-colored oil which is very thick. I know you are going to sleep better tonight knowing that bit of trivia! But it is important to the message because this perfume was difficult to harvest, since one had to trek halfway up a mountain to get it, and then take the time to distil the crushed stems. Thus the very expensive price for this perfume.

Brian P. Stoffregen in CrossMarks Christian Resources explains that the very act of Mary anointing Jesus' feet was also very interesting, because it was customary in that time that the servants wash the feet of the guests and the owners of the house. It would have been very unusual indeed for her as a host to perform such a task. It gets even more interesting, because after she pours the expensive perfume on Jesus' feet, she wipes his feet with her hair. Again, Stoffregen stresses that it is important to understand the customs and culture at this time and in this place, because a respectable woman did not unbind her hair in public. It was the humility and sacrifice that Mary demonstrated that was so remarkable.

There are elements in our society today that behave just like Judas did in this lesson. He feigned caring for the poor when he scolded Mary for using such expensive perfume on Jesus' feet when it could have been sold and the money given to the poor. I wonder how much of the money would have actually been given to the poor if the nard was sold as he had suggested? Judas, John tells us, was the one in charge of the finances for Jesus and the disciples. He was clearly labelled as a 'thief' in the Gospel reading and knew exactly what the nard was worth. It reminds me of a quote from Oscar Wilde that would be appropriate for Judas as he 'knew the price of everything and the value of nothing.' Judas was surprised when Jesus defended the apparent waste of a very expensive good because he did not realize what was going to happen to Jesus. He did not know the value and significance of what Mary was doing when she anointed the feet of Jesus.

Mary may have just simply wanted to repay Jesus for saving her brother's life using a precious substance that signifies the magnitude of the miracle Jesus had performed. What would it have meant if she anointed Jesus' feet with olive oil? Mary would not give to Jesus what had cost her nothing. Mary was showing all who were gathered in that house her devotion and love of Christ in a most vulnerable way and with humility. I would venture to say that she may even have been saying goodbye to Jesus before it was too late.

When someone close to us is near death, it is important to us that we affirm our love for them and, if there is anything between us, be reconciled, that is, try to restore favour or friendship with each other before it is too late. We hear many people say, "I wish I had had more time with my _____," – you fill in the blank be it mother, father, sister, brother, grandparent, spouse, or dear friend. At one time or another in our lives, there may have been a time where we have regretted not saying something to that person before they died; or missed too many opportunities to tell them or show them that we loved them. In bathing Jesus' feet in costly perfume and then wiping them with her hair, Mary is expressing her love for her rabbi and friend; she is showing her gratitude for all he has done for her and her family. Lazarus would not be at the table with them, had it not been for Jesus. And, if there had been anything between them, this humble, sacrificial act certainly communicates Mary's desire that they be reconciled, before it is too late.

The season of Lent calls us to the kind of devotion to God that Mary shows Jesus in today's Gospel. Lent suggests that before it is too late we need to give ourselves more completely to God, do something that

declares our love for God, show our gratitude to God for our many blessings, and, if possible, be reconciled with God.

Reconciliation and its companion 'justification' are the problem, of course. Unfortunately, we cannot do anything to effect justification in the eyes of God. Using the insight of Saint Paul, Luther taught justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ Jesus. What is 'justification'? It is an act of free grace by which God pardons the sinner and accepts him or her as righteous, only because of the saving work of Christ. What is 'grace'? Grace is the free and undeserved love and favour of God toward you and me as those who continually fall short of our high calling as the children of God; sinners, in other words.

In our baptism, we are reminded that by water and the Word, God delivers us from the power of sin and death, and has anointed us with the gift of the Holy Spirit. In the end however, it is God's love, mercy, and grace as revealed in the death and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ that brings about our reconciliation and justification. The call of today's Gospel, the call of Lent, and our call in the life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus is to give ourselves to God completely – in love, in good works, and in humble and faithful devotion; to turn to God and live, before it is too late.

What is true about the Christian life is that we never do these things merely for ourselves. Our discipleship is always lived out in community. Our love, our good works, our humble and faithful devotion, our choosing to walk the way of the cross – all these things benefit others. Consecrated discipleship, the discipleship revealed in Mary's bathing Jesus' feet with costly nard, affected everyone present. This is what love looks like; this is what discipleship looks like, Mary shows the larger community of the faithful.

I pray that before it is too late, we can all feel as much love and devotion for Jesus as Mary did when she knelt at his feet to honour and praise him. More importantly, we must act, as Mary did because it is our active discipleship and love that we show one another that is a form of worship and thanksgiving to God who has given us all we have and who has promised us eternal life through his Son, Jesus Christ.

Brian P. Stoffregen in CrossMarks Christian Resources

<http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john12x1.htm>