

*Beauty for Beauty's Sake*  
John 12:1-8  
March 3, 2024  
Pastor Sarah Wiles

Six days before Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, home of Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup> Lazarus and his sisters hosted a dinner for him. Martha served and Lazarus was among those who joined him at the table. <sup>3</sup> Then Mary took an extraordinary amount, almost three-quarters of a pound, of very expensive perfume made of pure nard (honeysuckle-like plant that grows in the Himalayas). She anointed Jesus' feet with it, then wiped his feet dry with her hair. The house was filled with the aroma of the perfume. <sup>4</sup> Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), complained, <sup>5</sup> "This perfume was worth a year's wages! Why wasn't it sold and the money given to the poor?" (<sup>6</sup> He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief. He carried the money bag and would take what was in it.)

<sup>7</sup> Then Jesus said, "Leave her alone. This perfume was to be used in preparation for my burial, and this is how she has used it. <sup>8</sup> You will always have the poor among you, but you won't always have me."

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Mary of Bethany appears three times in the gospels and proves that the bumper sticker is true: well behaved women rarely make history, she is unconventional every time. The first time Jesus comes to her house, and rather than helping to host him, Mary just sits there. She does not do her chores.

Then when her brother Lazarus has died, Mary blames Jesus and makes him cry.

Then there's this time when she takes \$30,000 worth of perfume and wipes it all over Jesus' feet and lets the rest run down the drain. She does it in public, like she doesn't care what people think. I think Mary really doesn't care.

People have come up with lots of explanations for what she's doing here, trying to make it not just an irrational, wasteful thing. Some say that she's prefiguring his sacrifice. Some say she was anointing him as Messiah or for burial.

Those may be true. They may be the point the author of John was trying to make. But I don't think they're why Mary did it. I don't think she was trying to make a theological point. Sometimes beauty for beauty's sake is enough. Sometimes extravagance is necessary.

What Mary did was definitely extravagant. She poured almost a pint of perfume on him. Think of a typical bottle of perfume. Then think about a carton of milk. That is too much perfume. It would have cost almost \$30,000. Any way you count it, it was too much.

Mary seems to believe that sometimes extravagance is necessary. Sometimes beauty for beauty's sake is essential.

This goes against every well-behaved, hardworking, puritan, Presbyterian, even justice-seeking impulse we have. Mary gives no evidence of working hard. She is not well-behaved. She is definitely not decent or orderly. She's willing to make a complete scene and waste resources on pleasure rather than using them for those in need. Mary is bananas.

Judas's protest makes sense. When they remembered the story years later, after they knew how everything turned out, they all said, see, even then we could tell he was a greedy so-and-so. But truth be told, at the moment, his objections made sense. It *was* wasteful. How can she do this when there are people in need? His objection was reasonable.

But Jesus sided with Mary. He dismissed Judas's plea for sensible stewardship. You will always have the poor with you, he said.

Let's be clear here. Jesus was not saying, "There are always going to be poor folks, so don't worry about it." That is not what Jesus meant. Jesus is quoting from the Bible, from Deuteronomy 15:11 where it says, "There will never cease to be poor people, therefore, I, the Lord, command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'" Jesus wasn't dismissing concern for the poor as irrelevant. He was affirming that concern for the poor is an on-going responsibility for any faithful lovers of God.

But that commitment will not be wiped out by one act of extravagant beauty and pleasure. Jesus hears Judas and says, don't you get it? Discipleship is not about being reasonable. It's about love poured out. What she is doing is beautiful.

Imagine the way the excess must have run across the floor. Did everyone's feet get wet that night? Imagine how the scent filled the air. Floated out of the house, down the street. This house had too much death recently. The terror and grief of Lazarus's illness and death still lingered. Jesus is less than a week from his own death. But for an hour or two the scent of death is pushed back, and love is all you can smell. Sometimes beauty is what we need most.

Mary is willing to be extravagant for the sake of love, and incredibly vulnerable. She lets go of how you're "supposed" to act. She gets down on her knees like a servant. She lets her hair down in front of men who are not her family. She leans over this man's feet and cares for them as tenderly as her own. Sometimes beauty for beauty's sake is the most important thing there is.

Everyone else treats Jesus as an authority, a teacher, a miracle-worker, or opponent. But Mary just treats him as human—with tired feet and a weary heart, a person in need of beauty and love and tenderness. I keep thinking of what a dehumanizing death Jesus will face, full of contempt and mockery and torture and exposure and shame. But here, for this beautiful moment, Mary gives him the gift of dignity. She gives him complete attention. She gives him kind, beautiful touch. Death doesn't win this night. Love is all you can smell.

When I was twenty-one, I had the opportunity to go to India and serve for two weeks in Mother Teresa's ministries. It was a completely overwhelming experience. I wasn't prepared for the chaos, the smells, the intensity of Kolkata. We spent half of every day at her hospice for dying people who have nowhere

to go. Sisters and Brothers of Charity go out and find people who are dying on the streets and bring them to this hospice where they can die with dignity.

As volunteers there was basically nothing we could do that was “useful.” We spent some time spoon feeding women who were hungry. But most weren’t very hungry. We would bring water to those who were thirsty. We changed bedpans. But most of the time we were told to just massage sweet, scented lotion into the weary arms and legs, hands and feet, of these women. Often they were non-responsive. We had no idea if it made any difference. Sometimes they were obviously in pain and our touch couldn’t relieve that. These women had lived unimaginably hard lives, and it showed on their bodies. We’d rub sweet smelling lotion over scars and scabs and dry skin. We’d work our way carefully around wounds that were open or festering. This place of death was always filled with the sweet scent of beauty.

Of course, it doesn’t make any sense. It doesn’t make any sense for college students from the United States to spend thousands of dollars to fly halfway around the world to rub lotion into dying women’s feet. It doesn’t make any sense for the Sisters of Charity to run their organization that way. All that time and money could be better spent. They must spend thousands of dollars on lotion alone every year. While people are starving in the streets. It’s wasteful. Irresponsible. I hate to admit that I spent a lot of my time focusing not on the woman’s hands in front of me but on all the ways I was sure Mother Teresa could have done a better job. Ha.

And yet—there is something unspeakably beautiful about people from wildly different worlds being drawn together over sweet lotion and weary feet at the end of their journey.

The beauty of Mary’s action is that it is both extravagant and human. We need that. Jesus needed that.

There is plenty to be said for the responsible use of resources. There is plenty to be said for restraint and hard work. There is plenty to be said for budgets and color-coded spreadsheets. All of that is reasonable.

And, if that is all we do, we miss something.

Remember, Jesus is the one who started his ministry by making 900 bottles of wine. And anytime he fed people, there were baskets full of leftovers. These things are not a waste. They are a powerful, profound affirmation of life in the face of so much death.

Beauty denies death the last word. It refuses to make efficiency king. It is human and life-affirming. It is extravagant. It is love. Our weary world desperately needs that.

Sometimes beauty for beauty’s sake is the gospel.

- Sarah W. Wiles, 2024