

Draw Near and Experience Something New

John 12:1-8

INTRODUCTION

O. Henry, the author known as the master of the short story, wrote a very moving story titled "The Gift of the Magi." I won't be surprised if you know it well. In it, we meet a young American couple, Jim and Della. They were very much in love, and very poor. Each of them had a very unique and precious possession.

- Della's hair was her glory. When she let it down, O. Henry writes, it almost served as a robe.
- Jim had a gold watch that he had inherited from his father. It too was his pride.

It was the day before Christmas. Neither Jim nor Della had been able to save enough money to buy the other person a gift.

- Della had exactly \$1.87, so she went out and sold her beautiful hair for \$20. With that money she bought a platinum fob for Jim's precious watch.

When Jim came home that evening and saw Della's short hair, he was stunned. It was not that he did not like it or that he loved her any less for, as the story is told, she was even more beautiful than ever. Slowly Jim handed his wife the gift he had bought for her – a set of expensive tortoise-shell combs with jeweled edges for her lovely hair. He had sold his watch to buy them.

Each had given up something that was valuable to them because of the love they had for the other. Love had caused them to look at what they had in a new way.

In today's epistle lesson (Philippians 3:4b-14), the Apostle Paul talks about what used to be the most important thing in his life: his resume. He was the perfect Jew:

... circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. (Philippians 3:5-6)

But then he met Jesus, and suddenly those things lost their value to him. Della's hair didn't matter. Jim's watch didn't matter. Paul's resume didn't matter.

In today's Gospel text, a similar story happens to a woman named Mary. As John tells the story, the Mary is the sister of Lazarus and Martha. Jesus is attending a dinner at their home – a dinner given in His honor. This text doesn't tell us "why" this dinner party was thrown, but if you back up just a couple of verses into John 11 you will see that Jesus has just raised Lazarus from the dead.

- By the way, when I was in Meijer earlier this week. I looked around the card section and did not see one a card that read "Congratulations on your recent resurrection!" Imagine that!
- Hallmark missed one! Just make a note. If you are ever invited to a resurrection party, you will need to make your own card.

During this party Mary brings out the most valuable possession she owned – a pint of pure nard and she poured it on the feet of Jesus.

Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet... (John 12:3)

Key adjective there: expensive. Expensive, but its value no longer mattered when compared to the love she had for Jesus. It still held great value for Judas! When he saw what she did, he objected!

"Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." (John 12:5)

For purposes of this sermon, let's translate that into today's dollars, and let's estimate on the low end. In 2021, the poverty line was \$25,760 per year. So let's say that Mary held in her hand a bottle of perfume worth \$25,000. She took \$25,000 and poured it out on the feet of Jesus. Because it meant nothing to her.

The Apostle Paul described all of his accomplishments as "garbage." The text actually calls it horse manure.

I consider them garbage ... (Philippians 3:8)

The majesty of this story, though, is not in the price tag of the perfume. Instead it is in the new way Mary viewed the value of what she had. You see, when you and I DRAW NEAR to the cross and really understand what Jesus did there, something new happens inside of us. What used to be important starts to fade. There at the cross God does something new.

Our Isaiah passage (Isaiah 43:16-21) expressed it like this: (God speaking)

Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.
See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? (Isaiah 43:18-19)

In that moment, Mary had four options:

#1: SHE COULD KEEP IT ALL FOR HERSELF

It was hers. She could do with it whatever she wanted to do.

When I was growing up, my most prized possession was my baseball card collection. I ate a lot of Topps Bubble gum to get all those cards. And they were mine. My brother had a collection too. And they were his. The rule of the house – Mom and Dad's rule,

not ours – was that I could not touch his cards and he could not touch mine, unless we agreed beforehand. Which we would never do.

I once heard about an expensive violin owned by the Nicolo Paganini. When he died, his will stipulated that it be donated to the museum in Genoa, Italy on the condition that no one could ever touch it. It had been his favorite and he couldn't bear the thought of people mishandling it. It was his, so he got to set the rules.

I'm told though, that if a violin is played regularly and handled carefully it will never wear out. But if you leave untouched, it will decay. And so there in full of the paying public, Paganini's valuable violin became worthless.

What a waste! But it was his.

#2: SHE COULD HAVE GIVEN IT TO SOMEONE ELSE

Someone other than Jesus.

Judas thought it should be given to the poor, although he didn't intend for the poor to actually get it.

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. (John 12:6)

There are thousands of options, hundreds in Clark County alone. Some faith based, some not. Some who manage your funds well; others who are administratively top-heavy.

When we were working to settle the estate of my Aunt Doris who died in November, she created a list of more than 30 non-profits she had regularly supported and wanted to continue to support, everything from community theaters to church camps to thrift shops and more.

#3: SHE COULD KEEP SOME AND GIVE SOME

God gratefully receives whatever we give. He never objects to the size of our gift ... unless we try to pretend that the "some" is really "all." That's what Ananias and Sapphira did. You can read what happened to them in Acts 5.

#4: SHE COULD GIVE IT ALL TO JESUS

And that's the option she took. Let me tell you why she did that:

- I believe Mary was saving this perfume for her own burial. That was not uncommon in that day. In fact, it was almost expected that you would be prepared for your own eventual death.
- Just like today, funerals are expensive. And survivors don't always have the financial resources to do what needs to be done.

- There was no embalming process, so dead bodies would be surrounded by jars of perfume. That's what the women intended to do when they went to the tomb of Jesus on Easter morning.
- But Mary had just experienced something that changed her perspective. Lazarus died and was raised again. And, standing by the tomb of her brother, she heard Jesus say:

“I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.
(John 11:25-26)

- And I think Mary had come to see her own death in a completely different light. No longer was she concerned about what would happen to her physical body. She knew she would forever because of her faith in this man Jesus.
- So that \$25,000 bottle of perfume was worthless to her, regardless of its worth to anyone else. It meant nothing – especially when compared to her eternal life in Christ.

Most of you are familiar with these words recorded in Matthew 6:19-21:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.
(Matthew 6:19-21)

As a part of my daily devotions, I often re-write the words of Scripture into my own words. That helps me think through the meaning. I recently came across my own paraphrase of those verses:

Don't make the things of this earth your most prized possession. If you do, you will lose your mind when natural forces cause them to decay, when natural disasters blow them away or when unscrupulous people embezzle them for their own selfish reasons. No, my friend, store your best assets in heaven. If you do, you rest assured they will never decrease in value and they will be backed for all eternity by the full faith and assurance of the government of God Almighty. Remember you will always give first priority to the storehouse where your important things are kept, so keep them in heaven.

APPLICATION

What bottles of perfume do you prize? It doesn't have to be expensive stuff. Della's hair was only worth \$20. Jim prized watch netted him enough to buy a few hair combs. The value isn't always in the price tag.

- I once walked through the ashes of a home, looking for anything that might be salvaged for this widow who had lost everything. The only thing I could find was a charred wedding picture. She sobbed when I handed it to her.

- I also have watched as people I know cling to their anger, hatred, grudges. They have destroyed every relationship they have, because the thing they cherish the most is the anger they have. It's theirs, and they are not giving it up.

But did you know that YOU are what God values the most?

- It's YOU that God cherishes the most.
- It's YOU that God refuses to give up on.
- It's YOU that He sacrificed His Son for.

When you DRAW NEAR, you will see something new. You will see the value of your life and the extent to which God goes so that you can spend eternity with Him.

Let us pray.

Amen.