

Sermon: John 12:1-8

A How-to Guide: Burying Treasure for Fun and Profit!

When I was a boy, I remember reading my dad's Popular Mechanics magazines. I enjoyed looking at pictures of what cars might look like in the year 2000—still no definitive word on the jetpack or the flying car—but I've still got my fingers crossed. I remember an ad with picture of a guy looking through x-ray glasses and seeing all the way through to the bones in his hand . . . and I remember thinking that if those things worked only half as good as they said they did that a BUNCH of my friends would have a set or two . . .or three already. And I remember the strong lure of all the money I could make selling and distributing GRIT magazine. Why was it that I knew of not one single soul who read GRIT magazine? Was that magazine really as good as it said it was?

The other thing I remember about the ads section in the back of Popular Mechanics magazine was the ads for correspondence courses. To a 10 year-old boy, these were my idea of a back-up plan if my solid plan of Park Ranger/R&B bass-player/outdoor gear-tester/professional endurance athlete/Television spokesperson/firefighter didn't pan out. George Sawyer also pointed out that I shouldn't forget the ads that would help me never to become a "98 pound weakling"!

With respect to the classically-trained locksmiths, gunsmiths, backyard lumber-mill operators and metal detector operators finding treasure out there, I'm sure y'all realize as well as I do that the best way to learn a trade isn't to simply learn the tricks of the trade, but to learn the trade itself.

In today's gospel lesson, it is Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus, who teaches the lesson on faithful discipleship. It is Mary that exemplifies the trade of devotion and servanthood. It is Mary who demonstrates that she understands what the Kingdom of God looks like, and that she understands what has to happen in order for it to come in its fullness.

This story of a woman anointing Jesus' feet appears elsewhere in the gospels, though she is not always identified as Mary the sister of Martha in the other gospels. Why is it that she chooses such an extravagant display, and why now?

Perhaps the reason to show gratitude to Jesus for bringing her brother Lazarus back from the dead. The same eyes that cried when Mary said, "Lord if you had been here he would not have died" would certainly be moved to express Joy at Lazarus' new life.

Perhaps the reason for Mary's steadfast and powerful gratitude comes from the new life she herself has found in "The Resurrection and the Life".

Jesus did teach a parable about the gratitude of a person with a large debt would be different from a person who had only had a small debt released.

Perhaps Mary felt the debt of her own sin and the response to its forgiveness should be as close to proportionate as she could get—she would need to give extravagantly as she had been forgiven—with extravagant grace.

Consider the words of the refrain in the beautiful gospel song "My alabaster Box":

Refrain

And I've come to pour

My praise on Him

Like oil from Mary's alabaster box
Don't be angry if I wash his feet with my tears
And I dry them with my hair
You weren't there the night He found me
You did not feel what I felt
When he wrapped his love all around me and
You don't know the cost of the oil
In my alabaster box

The purity of the perfume, or more correctly—ointment—is just one of many connections that John makes that we must be careful that our modern ears can still make out which help us to fully understand what Mary is doing: Generally, an anointing is done on a person's head. It was the common practice, however, at the time, to begin the preparation of a corpse for burial with the feet. Letting down her hair in public and drying Jesus' feet with it, Mary also indicates her love for Jesus in a manner that is consistent with the mourning and grieving practices of that time. Perhaps before everyone else, Mary realized that Jesus was literally walking on death row, that by raising Lazarus he had made himself too much a threat to the Jewish leaders, and that a chain of events had been set in motion from which there was no return. The practice of guards moving a prisoner on death row has been depicted with guards shouting, "We got a dead man walking here". Had Jesus' future finally become transparent to Mary that she would understand then that Jesus was the Passover Lamb for the world?

For me, the bottom line is that Jesus had become family to Mary. He had become as close as brother to her, to Martha, to Lazarus—was there anything that they would withhold from him if he needed it? In the same way, is there anything you would withhold from a member of your family?

There is a current movie out whose main character understands what family means. Sandra Bullock narrates and stars in “The Blind Side” as Leigh Ann Tuohy, a true story of a woman who takes in and adopts, figuratively and perhaps literally (you’ll have to watch), Michael Oher as a teenager. Michael, it turns out, is a gifted athlete who now plays for the Baltimore Ravens. Adoption, as it turns out, is an important theme for Christians everywhere. Consider that Paul writes in Ephesians 1:4-8

For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his (children) through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.

The similarity of the great lesson taught by the movie and the encouragement of today’s gospel lesson is this: You do things for family that you don’t do for just anybody. You do them because that’s what family does.

Last Thursday at our Providence Presbytery Meeting in Van Wyck, there were two candidates for ordination being examined. One of them, Aaron White, described his congregation at Boling Green as a “family” church.

By using that one descriptive phrase about Boling Green, Rev. White was really saying two different things. First, he was saying that Boling Green is a family church because darn near everybody in that church is related by blood or marriage to someone else in that church. Usually, being a "Family Church is prescriptive of size. But while we're on this topic let me say that in the almost four years that I have served alongside you in ministry, it seems that rarely a month or two goes by that I don't uncover a familial connection of some kind within this church. Jim Richardson used to say "Come back and bring your cousins". Some of y'all could have just said "We're all here already!"

However, the more powerful and more potent understanding of what it means to be a family doesn't have to do with size, it has to do with how we treat each other. Allow me to make the following observation: Taking care of family is different than taking care of just "people". It doesn't feel like "work" because our joy and our sorrows are shared together, one with another.

As we have steadily continued to make connections and be family for each other through DeaconCare, One Anothering, Stephen Ministry, and all of the ministry that takes place "off the record here at OAPC", I've sensed that there is anxiety leaving and confidence building. A few short months ago, there was some nervousness. Cold phone calls, the possibility of unearthing and uncovering old wounds almost forgotten, the uncertainty of what to say in a time of crisis—these things are not the things that tend to make all kinds of people say "Sign me up"! And to be honest, maybe some of that anxiety is legitimate. But what we've learned, I believe, is how to begin to make and strengthen our connections with our family in Christ. Mary's anointing of Jesus was not the act of a random stranger. Mary's

anointing of Jesus was an expression of compassion from a family member that said "I get it, I know what you're going through. I can see what's coming, and to the extent that I am able, I am going to go with you!" At the same time, Mary's anointing of Jesus says plainly "You mean the whole world to me. What can I do for you brother? How can I make it better?" As we begin to make connections at OAPC, so we too begin to walk the road with our brothers and sisters, our family in Christ. We bury the treasure of God's love deep in the heart of God by sharing it with one another.

At OAPC, Though our size and model of programming indicates us to be a complex congregation (Yeah, *complex* is right!) We are also still a family church! We take care of one another because that's what family does. And it goes without saying but still bears repeating that we have some long-lost brothers and sisters beyond the doors of this building who are going through good times and hard times right now, and every last one of them could use some family to share them with! Let's call our family to the table!

Romans 8:17 Now if we are children, then we are heirs--heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

II Corinthians 1:5 For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ.

Now, brothers and sisters, Understand this: There will be haters. There will be those who criticize. There will be those who question our motives. There will be those whose logic is solid enough, but whose vision of Jesus is clouded by greed or selfish motives. In the same way that God understands our gratitude, God will understand their character as well.

There will also be those who substitute the practices of an empty religiosity for pure and joyful obedience. There will be those for whom “those less fortunate than ourselves” is a term of condescension rather than compassion. There will be those who will say that EVERYTHING has a price, and they will think that means that money and power are the quantifications of authority without realizing that true authority is confirmed on the master in the eyes of the servant. For the times when that person is one of us, when it is US, may we ask God’s forgiveness. And in the times that we see clearly, may we follow on the road to Jerusalem.

The Church’s one foundation

Is Jesus Christ her Lord,

She is His new creation

By water and the Word.

From heaven He came and sought her

To be His holy bride;

With His own blood He bought her

And for her life He died.

’Mid toil and tribulation,

And tumult of her war,

She waits the consummation

Of peace forevermore;

Till, with the vision glorious,

Her longing eyes are blest,

And the great Church victorious

shall be the Church at rest.