

STEWARDSHIP

November 13, 2016

*John 12:1-8: **"From the Heart"***

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Many moons ago, a Sunday school teacher was just finishing a lesson on honesty. "Do you know where little boys go if they don't put their money in the collection plate?" the Sunday school teacher asked. "Yes ma'am," a boy blurted out. "They go to the movies!"

Another sermon about giving. I have to confess that I often get tired of them myself. Twice a year we have them, and it seems to me that those are always the Sundays in which we have the most visitors. I hope it isn't true, but I often feel that visitors are thinking to themselves: "Told you so! The church is always after money!" So, you start out with a little humor. But, no amount of humor will ever make us cease from being uncomfortable. Even more, get right down to it, the humorous story about the boy saving his money and keeping it from God's work in order to go to the movies is really a problem of the heart. And it is a problem we all have.

I have said it before and I'll say it again. Luther once said that the last thing to be converted in a person is the pocketbook! No doubt, the pocketbook is rather sensitive to us and is often the source of much squirming. Let's face it, it's hard to give up the pocketbook for God's work when you could open it up and go to the movies or . . . you name it. Indeed! We all have a heart problem.

It was six days before the Passover and Jesus arrived in Bethany. Here a dinner was given in honor of Jesus. The apostle John writes: "Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume (John 12:3)." It was about eleven ounces of what is called pure, undiluted nard. Nard, also known as spikenard is a fragrant oil derived from the root and spike of the nard plant, which grows in the mountains of northern India. It was very expensive and was used by the Romans for anointing the head. What is significant is that she used it in a way that was very unusual. She anoints Jesus' feet and wipes it with her hair during the meal in honor of Jesus. As one interpreter correctly writes:

It in the present instance, it is hard not to see royal overtones in Mary's anointing of Jesus, especially in light of the fact that the event is immediately followed by Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, where he is hailed as the king of Israel who comes in the name of the Lord. Attending to the feet was servant's work, so Mary's action shows humility as well as devotion.

The point is that this action revealed Mary's heart. Knowing the depths of her sin and the forgiveness to be received in Jesus her king, she shows herself to be a child of God. What is most valuable to her is her Lord and Savior. All that she has, even her hair, is to be given to Jesus who would die and be buried. The fact that she anoints his feet would seem to be a waste of such an expensive product, but to her it was not a waste by any means. It was more important than "going to the movies," we could say. It was an act that overflowed from her heart of faith. Furthermore, John makes a point to say that this was done "six days before the Passover" which places this act within the context of the festival that reminds the reader that Jesus is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. It was six days before the day

when Jesus would be crucified for all of our sins and die our death so that we might live. And John also adds that this was done in Bethany. In the preceding chapter, this was the place where Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. Mary anointing the feet of Jesus is all in the context of not only his death and burial, but also the raising of Lazarus. Again, this act of Mary was no random, “out of the blue” happening. She was saying something. She may not have grasped all the details of what she was saying, but it was **From The Heart** - her heart that was full of faith and true love as it had been touched by Jesus her only king.

John goes on to say: “But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, ‘Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii [roughly equivalent to a year’s wages] and given to the poor?’ He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it (John 12:4-6).” Three hundred denarii would have been roughly equivalent to a year’s wages for a common laborer - what we might conclude to be an outrageous sum of money. What Judas Iscariot said and was doing with the moneybag was also **From The Heart** and quite the opposite of what we see in Mary. Judas’ heart was not a heart of faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior, but a heart that believed in “going to the movies,” or you name it. Though having the appearance of great holiness, Judas’s objection turns out to be self-serving. He was full of himself. And his avarice will later lead him to betray Christ.

The response of Jesus to Judas is startling and further confirms much of what we have already said. “Jesus said, ‘Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me (John 12:7-8).’” In this statement our Lord is essentially saying to Judas, “She did not sell it in order that she might keep it for the day of my burial.” The word “burial” refers not so much to the event itself as to the laying out of the corpse in preparation for burial. The fact that Jesus then concludes with “for the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me,” indirectly concedes that under normal circumstances Judas may have had a point, but these are not normal circumstances. Mary’s sacrifice is then vindicated as it comes from faith and love toward Jesus who is the ultimate object of all we give.

In our epistle lesson for this morning the apostle Paul writes: “Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7).” I want you to concentrate on the fact that what we say and do is **From The Heart**. When it comes to any good works that we may or may not do, the question is one of motivation. Are we doing what we are doing because it flows from faith in Christ, or are we doing what we do because we are full of self. Of course, every Christian struggles with a heart that is at war. But, when we take note of the division, it shouldn’t remain divided for long. In repentance we put to death the sinful nature and rejoice over the gifts that have been given to us in Jesus Christ. Hopefully when we ask, “Why do we do what we do?” the answer is that it flows from faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of all our sins. We love because he first loved us. We do good because he is good and has done all good things.

God has graciously given us much so that we may exercise our faith by taking what is his and giving it back to him in the support of his kingdom here at Pilgrim. And even when God has tested us with

difficult times, his undeserved love has motivated us to be steadfast in the support of our congregation and her mission here and to the ends of the earth. Only now, let us be diligent that this good heart that God has established in us, continue to remain steadfast and zealous in serving him with our time, talents, and treasure. And where there is a dead heart, may God make it alive again. And since all of God's people struggle with sin and misuse what he has given us, may he daily melt our thankless hearts of stone so that we may cheerfully serve him with who we are and what we have.

We need to be careful that we do not let go of what God has so graciously given us. The example of Judas Iscariot looms large in this picture. Here was a man who for roughly three years sat at the feet of the Son of God. He saw the miracles and heard his powerful preaching. He was constantly under the Lord's care, and yet we find that his heart was somewhere else. His example forces us to take a good look at ourselves in terms of our response to God's mercy. And Mary's example brings us to real understanding of what it means to be so absorbed in the love of Jesus that you can't help but to love. This is what we pray for all of us.

Look at how we have been blessed to be in the presence of Jesus and his love through the Gospel and Sacraments. Many of us have had the privilege of sitting at the feet of our loving Lord for many years. He cares for us in so many different ways. Where are our hearts? Are they with Christ, or somewhere else? May God melt every heart of thankless stone!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott