

In a story reworked many times by early writers, Mary brings a fine perfume and anoints Jesus as her family, Jesus, and the disciples have dinner together at their home in Bethany. The event is a good time to allow Mary's gratitude for Jesus to spill over into the gratitude's in our lives.

Our story is told by John this morning – and again it is a very old one.

It has been reworked many times – in at least three other gospels.

In John - it is a good woman.

In Luke - she is a sinful woman.

In Mark - the woman anoints Jesus' head.

In Luke and John - she anoints his feet.

In a movie she will be wrongly remembered as Mary Magdalene.

And the differences go on.

In John - Judas objects.

In Mark - it was some of those present who object.

In Luke - it was Simon - the Pharisee who objects.

In Matthew and Mark - all this took place in the house of Simon - the leper.

In Luke - it happened in the house of Simon - the Pharisee.

Where does it happen today? It happens in the home of Lazarus.

Well – what to think – other than there is a core story here with a lot of situational details that appear interchangeable.

We know the New Testament writers gave little respect to women.

Their bias was often quite clear - so we just keep that in mind as we read.

In this story I am not so interested in what was said by bystanders.

I am more interested in what she said – and what she did.

What was she about in this story?

It seems to me that she was all about gratitude.

Certainly it could be gratitude for what Jesus did for her brother -
brought him back from his death bed – actually his tomb.

Surely that would have been part of it.

And – having been friends with Jesus for some time
and probably a supporter of his ministry
she probably was grateful for his work – the way he lived his life.
They knew it was probably going to end soon.



The story may also be about compassion and prophecy.

Jesus does say: “You will always have the poor – but not me.”

That may have come from Deuteronomy 15:11.

“For the poor will never cease to be in the land;
therefore I command you, saying,
'You shall freely open your hand to your brother,
to your needy and poor in your land.'”

Although the writers note that Judas is using this reference
for his own end - the idea may have been familiar:
And that was – to open your hand – be compassionate to others –
from the very depths of your person.

So it would be Mary with her anointing oil
(and not Judas with his pious speech)
whose response is compassionate.



A writer looking back on the story might also see Mary as prophetic.¹
As a prophet her behavior was no more strange than that of other prophets like Ezekiel -
when he ate a scroll as a sign that he carried the word of God around inside of him.

No stranger than Jeremiah who smashed the clay jar
as a way to show God's judgment on Judah and Jerusalem.

No stranger than Isaiah who walked around Jerusalem naked and barefoot
as an oracle against the nations.

Prophets do things one would not ordinarily do.
We can look at Mary's actions as foretelling the fact
that Jesus was going to die soon.

She was anointing him for burial.
Prophets do these sorts of things.
They act out the truth that no one else can see.

That is a way to listen to the story.



Another way is to think about how John
may be communicating the tension or setting up a competition -
between Judas' closed hand - and Mary's open hand.

Let's stay with Mary's hand and the gratitude it implies -
is a way to be – a way to live our lives.

Gratitude is a spiritual practice.²

Melodie Beattie writes that
gratitude unlocks something about life that gives it fullness.
Gratitude turns what we have into enough – and more.
Gratitude turns denial into acceptance – chaos into order – confusion into clarity.
It turns problems into gifts – failures into success –
and mistakes into important events.

Gratitude makes sense of our past - and creates a vision for tomorrow.

Gratitude is a spiritual practice.

Yes – let's stay with that.



Perhaps Mary can be a spiritual teacher for us as she shows gratitude to Jesus.

And I'll share a simple story.

A seeker once went to a holy woman in the desert
because life had become too chaotic.
He yearned to have balance and order restored within him.
The desert woman said to him:
Your life is chaotic because you have become dependent on change -
on excitement – on variety.
You want always to experience something new
instead of finding what is new through the repetition of what seems old.

If you would have balance and order within -
do one small thing at the same time each day with gratitude in your heart -

and slowly the tattered fragments of your life will be bound together
in a textured tapestry of beauty.

It does not take great doses of hardship -
only one small thing done every day at the same time – with gratitude in your heart -
one small thing – every day – at the same time – with gratitude in your heart -
one small thing – every day – same time – with gratitude.
And that will be enough.

Ask yourself the question:
How do the activities of my life keep me from practicing gratitude?



Now – I cannot imagine that the lives of Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus
were ever as busy and chaotic as ours.

But – they could have been.

The Romans and the religious types who liked things they way they were -
were close on the heels of Jesus.

Life was anything but calm.

We don't know anything about how Mary normally lived her daily life.

But - that evening when she breaks open the fine oil
and pours it out on the feet of Jesus - she acts out the extravagance of God.

It will not be long before people will start to see Jesus -
as one who poured out his life - so we can learn something – about living.

It's not an economical thing.

It is a picture of God.

That is – Mary’s actions in the story for today.

I expect it is also about a stance we might take from the heart -
that keeps us connected to the source.

The story suggests a habit we might get into
for conditioning our hearts.

And if you were to engage the habit for yourself
you will find that your heart will be full and overflowing.

It might even feel like extravagance.

So there we have Mary, Martha, Lazarus, Jesus, and probably several disciples
that night in Bethany – an event the gospel writers have all thought to be important -
in different ways or perhaps for different reasons.

This week – for me – it has been important for its images of gratitude -
and a chance to let Mary’s gratitude for Jesus –
spill over into the gratitude’s in my life.

That is what I am learning from it.

¹ This discussion adapted from Barbara Brown Taylor in *Bread of Angels*, p. 60.

² From *Seasons of Grace: The Life-giving Practice of Gratitude* by Alan Jones, John O’Neill, Diana Landau