

## The Adoration Ethic

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John 12:1-8

*Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."*

Several years ago, I was on a mission trip with a large group of church members, repairing the homes of the poor. We would work on the homes for a week and then another church group would come and pick up where we left off, and this would continue throughout the summer months. During that week, we would often grow quite close to the families we were serving, especially if those families had children. This particular year, one of the teams from our church was working on a home that had in it a little girl who was about five or six. She loved getting to know the people who came to work on her home. She loved spending lunch and water breaks with them.

However, by the end of the week, it became apparent that she was deeply appreciative of the grace and love exhibited by these adults and teens who were serving Christ by serving her family, appreciative in a way that went far beyond the normal wisdom of the average five-year-old heart. On the last day of work, as the team was loading its van with tools and tired workers for the last time, this little girl was seen at the back of the van among the saw horses, the miter box, the water coolers, and the buckets full of smaller tools, stuffing a shoe box between the equipment and then quietly walking away.

The team leader, a veterinarian named David, noticed this. He opened the box and found a few small coins, totaling less than fifty cents. He took the box to the girl and asked her what it was and why she did it.

“It’s for you,” she said.

“But why are you giving us money?” the team leader asked.

“For what you did to my house. I wanted to pay you for all the work you did. It is all I have.”

In this morning’s text, Jesus is six days from death. He is having dinner at the home of Lazarus, a dear friend Jesus had raised from death when Lazarus’ sister Mary begins to anoint Jesus’ feet with pure nard, made from a Himalayan plant called *spikenard*, a perfume which would have been worth almost one year’s wages, or 3,600 hours of agricultural work. Her act was extravagant, profound, shocking, something which seemed wasteful, especially to Judas Iscariot, the treasurer of Jesus’ group, the one who would eventually betray Jesus. He wonders how could one be so extravagant? How could she use this incredible resource in such a way? This perfume was quite possibly the most expensive item the disciples had ever seen, and it is poured on Jesus *feet*. It was the head that was supposed to be anointed! She wastes an unimaginable fortune and does not even do it correctly!

Jesus responds to this criticism by talking about time, specifically about how time is to be savored, how time is limited, how time is so easily taken for granted. Mary is aware of the coming death of Christ. Mary knows her time with this amazing friend who made her brother walk out of his grave is drawing to a close. Mary looks at Jesus, at all that he is, at all that he has been, at all that he means and it casts everything she knows and everything she has in a new and different light. This is Jesus the Christ. This is the last time we will all be together like this. Everything is about to change. *What could I possibly be saving this expensive perfume for if not for tonight? If not for this man?*

There is a bumper sticker I have seen numerous times that reads: DON’T POSTPONE JOY. I believe Mary knew this. Now is the time to enjoy God. Now is the time to express our feelings to Christ and to one another. Now is the time to claim the promises that God makes to us, promises of new life, life that is abundant. Now is the time to bring the very best we have to Christ. There is a time for service to Christ’s people. There is a time for repentance. There is a time for study and learning. There is a time for prayer. Yet we sometimes forget that a natural and appropriate response to the

grace of God in Jesus Christ is pure adoration, a pure expression of giving the very best we have because we believe that our Lord is more than worth it.

I recently heard a story about a small United Methodist congregation who closed after several years of decline. As the assets of the church were being accounted for after the congregation disbanded, it was discovered that they had \$400,000 in a savings account. When asked why they did not invest these ample funds in the life and ministries of the church, why they did not put them to use blessing God, they responded by saying that they were saving it for a rainy day.

In this text, we hear Jesus making the point that the storm clouds are gathering for him and the rain is on its way. Now is the time to respond to Christ with all that we have. Now is the time to bring out the best. Now is the time to reflect on who Christ has been for us in the past and let that determination guide how we regard everything we have and everything we are today and in the future.

Let's be honest. The world will always be full of Judas Iscariots who will try to tell us that anything that we offer to Christ and his church is a waste. Some of you here this morning are possibly here over and against the objections of members of your own family. There will always be those out in the world who cannot see the value in giving anything of ourselves to Christ is foolishness but when we know Christ, when we have experienced his grace, when we have begun to live the new life only he can bring, when we consider that from which he has delivered us, then how can we not bring out the very best, in the here and now, as a fragrant offering to our God?

I admit that I really struggle with this text. It seemed like Judas was right, that the perfume could be sold for a profit, that it could be put to a better use. This is the way I look at life. Judas' response is right up my alley. I really struggle to find consistency in Jesus' message here and his messages regarding economic justice found elsewhere in the gospels.

I made this observation once to one of the leaders of a country church I once pastored, and he responded by saying, "Think about the churches on this Charge. Think about the beautiful stained glass we have in our windows. Those windows were bought a hundred years ago by farmers who certainly had more financial risk in their lives than you or I do, but they wanted what they built for God to be beautiful."

And he is right. I am sure there were people at those meetings who really, really cast doubts on anything in these churches that was not absolutely essential, yet we can look at these beautiful churches and know which side won. Men and women sacrificed and gave so that these buildings would themselves be testimonies to faith in the love of the Jesus who was on and is on his way to the cross for them, for you, for me, and for the world. Men and women who knew that the day after these churches were built, the day after the steeples were installed, the day after the bell was put in the tower, the day after stained glass was put in the windows, a hail storm could come through and destroy that year's crop. Yet they gave, generously, extravagantly, and some might even say foolishly, and their giving provided these communities with ever-present reminders of the glory of the God who deserves all of our praise, all of our gifts, all of our talent, and all of our love and adoration.

Adoration is not easy for me, and what adoration I can do is done more inwardly than outwardly. It is so easy for preaching to become formulaic; In this morning's text Jesus does something. Here is an illustration of something similar that was done in modern times. Now go into the world and do the same thing in thanksgiving to the God who saves you, so that your faith may become visible by your works.

O.K., I will admit, it is not a bad formula for preaching, but it is not necessarily the best or only formula either, especially when it gets the endorsement of Judas Iscariot.

In 1905, German sociologist, economist, and politician Max Weber published *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which is the book where Weber coined the term "the Protestant work ethic." In a nutshell, the Protestant work ethic can be traced back to some of the thoughts of the Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin, who placed new emphasis on the value of hard work.<sup>1</sup> Despite numerous problems with this concept, I believe in it lies a kernel of truth: we (especially we preachers) often regard the depth of our faith to be inexorably linked to the amount of our doing, and the danger of this is that, when taken to extremes, Jesus begins to resemble a diet or an exercise program, where we get out of him only what we put into our relationship with him. So we are told, read more, pray more, serve more, show up more, give more, do more.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protestant\\_work\\_ethic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protestant_work_ethic)

While not denying that our faith should and does affect how we live and what we do, I believe Christians today are in desperate need of an adoration ethic. As I imagine it, the Christian Adoration Ethic is about having those moments like Mary did, those moments too great for words, that take our breath away, those moments where we allow ourselves to understand and accept that God really *really* does love us and want us to be happy; moments where our lives are dominated by gratitude for what God has done and is continuing to do in Jesus Christ; moments where we can allow ourselves to stop *doing* for a while, to start *being*, and to be O.K. with allowing God to be in control for a while. Because, when we allow our lives to be dominated by the ethic of adoration, the extravagant giving like we see in the home of Lazarus this morning no longer requires an ethic of work, because Mary's gift only seems extravagant if we take it out of the context of the extravagant gift Christ, in this text, is about to give to us.

And whether it be the music of Bach, the architecture of Wren, the painting of Michelangelo, the prose of Milton, the poetry of Watts, beautiful churches in the country, or a poor little girl at the back of a mission team van, that which we give of ourselves to Christ is a witness to the world to who Christ is, what Christ does, what Christ means, and where Christ has gone and continues to go for us and for the world he came to save.

Gloria In Excelsis Deo.