

If you were to interview four eyewitnesses at the scene of an accident, you are likely to have four different accounts of the same event. The basics might be the same, but all will inevitably vary in the details because each person has a different perspective. So it is with today's Gospel.

Here's where the four Gospel writers agree: Jesus was a guest at dinner and during the course of the meal, a woman takes very expensive perfume and anoints him with the entire bottle. There is an objection – the perfume would be put to better use being sold and the proceeds used on behalf of the poor. Jesus rebukes the objection, noting that while there is always an obligation to the poor, the time when Jesus can be anointed with oil is very short so its use in anointing him is most appropriate, as he is about to be buried.

With this very familiar story and with four different versions, the stories tend to merge such that a fifth account comes forth. If asked to tell this story from memory, and

being influenced by Andrew Lloyd Weber's rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*, particularly the song "Everything's Alright," here's what I'd say in a summary account: On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus stops to have dinner at somebody's house. A prostitute named Mary Magdalene anoints Jesus with oil and wipes it off or rubs it in with her hair. Judas gets made at the waste, saying that it is better used for the poor. Judas and Jesus have words. Jesus says "the poor will always be around but I won't be; leave Mary alone."

This story, while sharing the basic outline, is not the Gospel witness. Luke's version occurs earlier in his narrative than the other three Gospels. The message he wants us to hear is one of faith, salvation, forgiveness and peace, particularly in regard to his central character, the woman<sup>1</sup>.

Matthew and Mark have this story set in the home of Simon the leper and the woman, who's deed shall be remembered forever,

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<sup>1</sup> Marion L. Soards, "The Gospel According to Luke," *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version*, Michael D. Coogan, ed., (Oxford University Press: Oxford New York) 2010, 1844.

remains nameless. It takes place in the days leading up to the crucifixion.

Like Matthew and Mark, John's version of this event takes place just before Jesus enters Jerusalem for the final time.

Jesus is the guest of honor at the home of his closest friends,

Lazarus, Mary and Martha. The dinner occurs shortly after

Lazarus has been restored from the dead. The Twelve are

assumed to be present. The meal must have been

characterized by good food and good company, filled with

gratitude that Lazarus is alive and able to share stories of the

"remember when" type, as well as awe at what the LORD can

accomplish within our lives.

Mary and Martha continue with their roles previously

assigned to them. Martha serves the assembled, and Mary

takes the better part. Mary is not subject to the denial of the

other apostles who cannot or will not see that the resuscitation

of Lazarus will precipitate Jesus own death. Mary wordlessly

yet powerfully anoints Jesus. Her gift is extravagant and lavish, used liberally and without regard for how much she uses. This extravagant and lavish gift foreshadows Jesus own extravagant and lavish gift to all of creation in his willingness to die on the cross. In this version, Mary anoints Jesus feet instead of his head, as in Matthew and Mark. This clearly signals that she is anointing him for burial. Further, if you think about it, how many people seek to minister to Jesus rather than the other way around?

Judas is horrified, much like we might be horrified that a limited resource is being used in such a seemingly wasteful and needlessly wanton way. Think of what can be accomplished with that money if used prudently and wisely. John takes care to let us know that Judas isn't really concerned about the poor, rather, Judas' concern is that he is able to skim a little something something off the top of the treasury, as Judas is a thief.

Here in this story we have a clear heroine and a clear bad guy, but that is only on the surface of the story. It's too easy to believe that Judas is spending all of eternity in Hell and Mary is spending eternity with the saints, for John is presenting us with two characters that represent the opposite sides of the same coin: both are apostles, both fulfill God's purpose, yet one is faithless and one is faithful. They represent both ends of the spectrum of discipleship.

If you believe, as I have tended to, that Judas resides in the place of eternal discomfort, forever separated from God, then doesn't it logically follow that Judas is beyond the reach of Jesus' love and saving embrace?<sup>2</sup> That question is uncomfortable. Our Lenten series speaker, Ben Click might tell us of Mark Twain that Twain wrestled with the idea of Judas fulfilling God's purpose and then being flung into the outer darkness as patently unfair. And it is unfair.

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<sup>2</sup> George W. Stroup, "Theological Perspective," *Feasting on the Word Year C vol. 2*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville KY) 2009, 142.

It's important to remember that all the other apostles, including the apostles' apostle, Peter, betrayed Jesus as well. None hung around for Jesus' trial or spoke on his behalf. And we know that Peter was forgiven. Is it such a stretch to believe that Judas was forgiven as well?

In Mary's action, in her witness we see a reflection of God's own extravagance beyond all reason in and through Jesus' willingness to give up His life so that we might gain ours. We see that in God's economy, within the Kingdom of God, there is a mindset of abundance. In Judas' words and actions, we see a mindset of scarcity and of lack – we see this as the reality of the world.

While I present this as a duality, it really is a continuum. As Jesus' disciples, we all possess characteristics of both Judas AND Mary. We live our lives in the shadow of the cross that is the ways of the world are part of our reality, just as we live our lives in the continual unfolding of God's Kingdom, in the

presence of the risen Christ. There is a tension in these two realities.<sup>3</sup> In these last days of Lent, let us reflect on how we can be companion's of Jesus on the Way, how we might be like Jesus in our extravagant acts of compassion and generosity, and how we might resist the world's messages of scarcity and lack. We are a kingdom people and as we move ever closer to Good Friday and confront the powers of this world, we have faith in the hope of the resurrection. AMEN.

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<sup>3</sup> H. Stephen Shoemaker, "Homiletical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word, Year C, vol 2*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville KY) 2009. 1145