

## **“Life’s Toughest Choices”**

**John 12:1-8**

Preached By

Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor

First Baptist Church

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This morning our attention is drawn to one of the most dramatic displays of gratitude in the New Testament. What sets this story apart from others is the silence of the main character. She never says a word but lets her actions speak for her. Listen as I tell her story.

Jesus and the disciples have made their way to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. Passover, you recall, commemorates the release of the children of Israel from over four hundred years of bondage in Egypt. To this day, our Jewish friends gather in the spring to tell this story and thank God for leading their ancestors to a new and better life.

A few days before Passover, Jesus and the disciples were invited to dinner at the home of their good friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus. They lived in Bethany, a little less than two miles from Jerusalem on the road to Jericho.

While Jesus and the disciples were eating, Mary entered the room carrying a container of expensive perfume. She went directly to Jesus and proceeded to pour all of it on his feet. When this was completed, she wiped his feet dry with her hair.

Upon smelling this sweet scent of friendship, Judas decided to overshadow it with the stench of harsh criticism, “Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages.” (John 12:5)

“Leave her alone,” Jesus replied, “It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.” (John 12:7)

**What part of this story intrigues you the most?** For me, it is the words of Jesus to Judas, and maybe all the disciples. I find Jesus’ rebuke and the reason for it fascinating and puzzling.

Why was Jesus quick to defend Mary? After all, Judas made a good point. The proceeds from the sale of almost a pound of this expensive perfume could have fed several hungry families.

To understand why Jesus rebuked Judas, we need to discern why Mary anointed Jesus’ feet that night. It appears this was her way of expressing gratitude to Jesus for raising her brother, Lazarus, from the dead.

You recall from the previous chapter Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus that their brother was gravely ill, no doubt hoping he would come and do something to help him recover. By the time Jesus arrived, Lazarus had been buried three days.

Jesus asked to be taken to the place Lazarus was buried and, by God’s grace, he brought Lazarus back to life and reunited him with his sisters. You can imagine how grateful Mary and Martha were for what Jesus had done. He turned their tears of sorrow to tears of joy, and Mary and Martha had to let Jesus know how grateful they were.

This dinner was Martha’s way of expressing her appreciation. Anointing Jesus’ feet with perfume was Mary’s.

Jesus knew this, and he also knew how much Mary’s encouragement and support meant to him. This humble act of devotion and gratitude lifted his spirit and prepared him not for burial, but for the challenges he would face during the tumultuous week to come.

How could Jesus sit idly by and let Judas trample over Mary’s beautiful and tender heart? He could not and would not.

“Leave her alone,” Jesus replied, “It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.”

**Why do you think this story was included in the fourth gospel?** What lessons did the Johannine community want their readers, including us, to glean from it?

Perhaps they wanted to highlight the role of women in Jesus’ ministry. Throughout the gospel of John, it was women who embodied discipleship. This is certainly true in this passage where Mary’s faithfulness, kindness and generosity are on display.

Maybe those who assembled this gospel wanted to promote the value of generosity, especially when expressing gratitude and demonstrating support for a beloved friend. Mary held back none of the perfume, as the disciples were probably hoping she would. She poured all of it on his feet as a way of letting Jesus know how much she loved and appreciated him. Her gift to him had to be as extravagant as her love for him.

I suspect this story was included to caution us about being critical of other peoples’ decisions. They may have reasons completely unknown to us for making the choices they do. Mary certainly did.

Mary sensed the danger Jesus faced by coming to Bethany to help her family and then returning days later for Passover. She knew he was taking a great risk since the jealous and disgruntled authorities were searching for him and her brother.

How could she encourage Jesus and let him know she appreciated his courage and compassion? She found a way, didn’t she? Yet, she was severely criticized and humiliated for doing it.

There is another reason I believe this story found its way into the fourth gospel, and it has to do with Jesus’ stern rebuke of Judas. I believe those responsible for passing it down to us wanted us to know the toughest decisions we often have to make are between two good choices.

“Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages,” Judas blurted out as soon as he smelled that perfume and saw what was happening. With these critical words, Judas put another option on the table, one that was hard to refute.

So, who was right, Mary or Judas? Which was the better use of this perfume, anointing Jesus’ feet or selling it so hungry people could eat?

Looking back, I realize the toughest decisions I have made were between two good choices. Often they were agonizing because I didn’t want to eliminate either one of them.

I have noticed decisions between good and bad are easier to make, not that I always do what is right. Having to decide between good and good is much tougher because strong arguments can be made for selecting both of them.

How do you decide when you are caught in this dilemma? I believe you must ask God to help you discern what is needed at the moment. You might not have made this same decision a month earlier and might not make it a month later, but that is all right. Assess what is needed under the present circumstances and do it.

Who could argue with giving to the poor as Judas proposed? In Matthew’s account of this event, the other disciples voiced their support for Judas. They were on board with him, but surprisingly, Jesus was not.

“Leave her alone,” Jesus replied, “It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.”

Was Jesus justifying selfishness? Was he ignoring poverty? Was he absolving his disciples of their responsibility to feed the hungry?

Certainly not. No one who knew what was important to Jesus could accuse him of being insensitive to the plight of the poor or overlooking their needs. He devoted his life to meeting the needs of the least, the last and the lost. His words should never be misconstrued to imply he was selfish or indifferent.

The emphasis in Jesus' rebuke of Judas was not on the first part of the sentence but the final section. "You will always have the poor among you, **but you will not always have me.**"

Timing is everything. Knowing what to do at any given time is the sign of a wise person. Mary knew. Jesus did, too. Judas did not.

This is why Mary poured all of her valuable perfume on Jesus' feet. It is why Judas rebuked her and Jesus quickly came to her defense.

**How did Mary get to be so wise?** Do you recall another time Jesus and the disciples ate a meal in Mary, Martha and Lazarus' home? Mary was criticized by her own sister, Martha, for sitting at Jesus' feet listening to him teach instead of helping in the kitchen, and once again, Jesus came to Mary's defense. I think this story helps us to understand why Mary was so thoughtful and wise.

Mary valued listening and learning. She was a good student who took advantage of every opportunity to listen to Jesus teach about what was most important in life. She took in every word Jesus said about God, faith, relationships, values, priorities, love, loyalty, generosity, encouragement and hope. When it came time to decide what Jesus needed from her less than a week before his crucifixion, she knew.

On the spur of the moment she changed her plans for this precious treasure. She used it, all of it, to feed Jesus' spirit and to express her profound appreciation for his friendship.

**Did Mary make the right decision?** Was this the best use of this expensive perfume? I am convinced Jesus would say yes. How do I know?

A week later, Jesus shared a dinner with his disciples in the Upper Room just hours before he was arrested. Do you recall what Jesus did at the end of that meal? He stood up, grabbed a basin of water, picked up a towel and washed the feet of his disciples.

Where do you think he got this idea?

This week, inspire those around you by surprising them with an act of gratitude and love. Listen to your heart. Be open to the leadership of the Holy Spirit in the way you use your time, talents and resources.

Be flexible. Be generous. Be faithful.