

April 3, 2022
Fifth Lent/Communion

John 12:1-8

“Penny Wise – Pound Foolish”

“*Practically speaking*” ...sounds virtuous. We have many such questionable virtues in our culture. We are considered more virtuous if we – sleep fewer hours each night, lose weight, work constantly, and get up early in the morning. Are these real virtues? Not really. Perhaps the king of our faux virtues in modern living is on display when someone asks, “How are you?” and we say, “Busy – really busy.” Of course, Vladimir Putin has been busy lately, but we wouldn’t call his efforts virtuous.

In our text today we encounter a similar sort of appeal to virtue. Jesus has *returned to the scene of the miracle* where he raised Lazarus from the dead – and quite reasonably they have a party for him. The scene is set with all the expected characters – there is *Martha* who finds meaningful service in managing the party and providing the food. *Lazarus* is seated with Jesus at the table – just in case anyone needs a reminder as to why they are having a party. And then there is *Mary*. What *are* we to do with Mary?

Mary is a square peg in a round hole world. She hasn’t gotten the message – common in her day - that *women aren’t supposed to learn*. She loves and is devoted to Jesus when so many around are still trying to make up their minds. Mary hasn’t learned society only affirms her sister’s choices for service and not hers – which are so deeply personal and public.

What are we to do with Mary? The church through the ages has said the reasonable response is ***to honor her***...Mary who in her love for Jesus ***ignores social convention and gender role expectations***. Jesus honors her today. Should we?

We might be tempted to adopt Judas’ line of reasoning because it is so, well, practical. We know John points out we shouldn’t listen to the traitor who is a thief but really, *Judas has a point doesn’t he?* Where *did* that expensive perfume come from, anyway? Doesn’t it feel like she is throwing money around when they are surrounded by so much need? “*We appreciate your enthusiasm, Mary, but perhaps you should have thought this through a little more carefully.*”

This has a certain appeal until we hear Jesus say, “**Leave her alone.**” And we begin to get that *sinking feeling* Jesus is going to point out something we have gotten wrong - again. But let’s not just take it – let’s engage the argument.

Hey Jesus, you are happy to defend Mary – but didn’t she do *something wild* letting her hair down and wiping your anointed feet with her very personal locks? Wasn’t that out of bounds? Scandalous behavior you ignored?

We know women covered their hair. In such cultures men might only see their wife’s hair let down for the first time on their wedding night. But it is *also true* that loosening one’s hair so that it is **disheveled** is *a universal sign of mourning and grief*. Jesus is on his way to die – and **Mary gets it**. Mary anoints Jesus body for burial and grieves the coming events which will take his life. How is it the one we don’t know what to do with – the one who won’t stay in her place – this one - *understands better than anyone else* present that day?

And if we read this passage at all carefully – we will stumble over the final words of Jesus. “*You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.*” Some have heard Jesus saying to be devoted to him we should ignore the poor. In truth it is quite the opposite. Caring about those who are in desperate straights is something we do *because* of who Jesus was and is. But in that moment Judas was *using the poor as a means of throwing shade* on Mary’s act of devotion. An act he would not have been capable of doing dressing up his petty criticism in noble clothing.

In truth, Jesus, as he so often does, *was referring to scripture*. I suspect everyone in the room would have recognized it – scripture from Deuteronomy 15 which says *since there will always be poor – be sure to be generous in caring for them*. And by the way Judas, when was the last time you gave to the poor?

As God’s children – let’s avoid questionable expressions of virtue which lead us to be penny wise and pound foolish. Like Mary, let’s take our pound of devotion and offer it to Jesus. Let’s tune in to who God is calling us to be and what God is calling us to do *without worrying if it will pass muster with virtues that aren’t truly virtuous* – you know, like – *We’ve never done it that way before!* Creative, passionate, faithful Mary is the hero here...let’s be like her.