

“Why Jesus Acts out of Character”

John 12:1–8

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A number of years ago in my last setting I wrote a dramatic sermon with multiple characters in it in addition to me. It was a year when Christmas fell on a Sunday, and there had been a good bit of conversation in public spaces about whether churches should have services on Christmas, which seemed absurd, but playing off this absurdity, I scripted a staff meeting where the ministers at the church debated whether or not to have worship on Sunday that year.

I wrote in all our personality quirks, including my own, and thus there was a considerable amount of humor. I confess that I enjoyed writing this sermon more than any other. My colleagues were resistant, but when they read the manuscript, they laughed, even at themselves, and it worked. For the record, I have not written such a sermon here, yet, but doing something like this depends not only on having good relationships among staff; it requires a certain level of predictability in how people function. We had that predictability there, as we do here.

The characters in the brief story we have read today from John have this kind of predictability too. Almost everyone seems to be acting according to script. Mary is yet again the model disciple. In Luke 10, she sits at Jesus’ feet, listening to his teaching. Here she anoints his feet with perfume, drawing Jesus’ affirmation and praise! Yay for her!

Judas is the bad guy we know, every story needs one. Theologian Karl Barth tries to redeem him, spends forty-eight pages in his five hundred-page *Church Dogmatics* arguing that he is not beyond redemption. But be that as it may, we know Judas is the bad guy, John says so, he has no real concern for the poor, he steals from the common purse. “Boo!” we say, “Boo!”

Martha is here too, and what is she doing? It is a dinner party; so, she is serving. Of course, she is. And Lazarus is here, the party is for him. He has just been raised from the dead, after all. What is he doing?

Nothing much, just being here, like always; apparently, he is the strong, silent type. Everyone is doing exactly what we would expect him/her to be doing, I could write this script, well, except for one person, Jesus.

Jesus has spent a great deal of time ministering to the poor and marginalized. A different Mary, his mother, predicted as much in the prophetic song we call *The Magnificat* which speaks of filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty (Luke 1:53). Jesus includes concern for the poor throughout his teaching all the way to parable about Judgment Day when the Son of Man will separate people as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. We know how that story goes. Those who share food and clothing with the poor, welcome the stranger, care for the sick, and visit the imprisoned do these things for Jesus and are welcomed into God's eternal care (Matthew 25:31-46).

So, when Judas criticizes Mary for using so much costly perfume to anoint Jesus' feet when the money which bought it could have fed so many hungry people, we might expect Jesus to agree. It is Judas speaking, John has impugned his motives, rightly or wrongly, but Jesus can separate the message from the messenger. Yet he does not agree with Judas, he praises Mary, and he says the poor will be with us always, while he will not.

Some people have taken these words as a blessing on complacency toward the poor. Since there will always be poor people, we need not worry about addressing their needs. It is a self-serving and uniformed perspective. Not only does Jesus say otherwise throughout the Gospels; in this text, he is quoting the first half of Deuteronomy 15:11, which says, "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth," the second half of which says, "I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'" The ubiquitous nature of poverty is motivation to act, not cause for complacency.

So, why does Jesus praise Mary and not Judas? Partly because Mary is affirming him in an act of devotion, and while there will always be poor people to help, he will not be with them much longer. This suggests that there is a place for extravagance among Jesus' followers, not wasteful spending, but extravagance in honoring the God who was in Christ. Christ is worthy of such adoration through music, art, and

majestic worship spaces like this, and if we wait to offer such adoration until every human need is met, we will never offer it all.

There are limits to such extravagance, though it is difficult for us to discern exactly where they are. I found it interesting that right when the new Catholic Cathedral in Raleigh was being completed for at least \$41 million dollars, Pope Francis moved Bishop Burbidge, who said he was told in a vision by God to build this cathedral, to Virginia. Maybe they needed a new cathedral too or maybe the Pope, a justice advocate, was sending a message. Who knows? Only the Pope knows and only God knows exactly which acts of extravagant devotion make sense in this world of immense need and which border on idolatry.

But Jesus' affirmation of Mary is not just based on the fact that she expresses devotion to him. He says, "She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." Mary seems to be signaling an awareness at some level of what lies ahead for Jesus, as in death. Anointing a person's head might point to the possibility of royalty and power, anointing feet is another matter.

Ian often calls me the Bluebird of Happiness facetiously, because I always seem to have some bad news. Mary is the Bluebird of Happiness here. There is a party going on and she gets Jesus talking about death, yet she is wrapping this bad news in a shroud of hope, as an act of praise, perhaps offering an omen of things to come. But whatever she knows at this point, she is affirming Jesus in advance of what is to come.

It reminds me of a lady in a previous church who had moved to our community after living all her life in a small mountain community in Tennessee. She was deeply connected to that community and her church there, and the people adored her, so much so that they decided to have a funeral for her before she left. It wasn't exactly a funeral, but they noted that people gather at funerals to say nice things about a person, but the person is not there to hear it. So, they went ahead and gathered with this lady before she moved and offered all those kind words to her.

Perhaps Mary is offering something like this to Jesus. She pours the perfume made of pure nard on his feet, filling the room with a magnificent scent, and then she does something that moves from being extravagant to scandalous by taking down her hair and using it to wipe

his feet. It is an intimate act, a tender gesture, an expression of affection, suggesting that there is a place for such a thing in our lives.

If Jesus has meant something to us, since Jesus has meant everything to us, something more than a formal word of acknowledgement seems appropriate, something more personal, more costly not necessarily in terms of money but of our vulnerability. For the people we love, do we not sometimes go overboard? They are worth everything we put into a gift we buy, a meal we cook, a trip we arrange. Christ is worth the songs we sing, the service we offer, the pictures we paint, the plays and dances we perform, the people we embrace in love.

Mary offers an intimate gift to Jesus, a ritual act of affirmation before he dies, but in the process, she also underscores the significance of Jesus' suffering and death. In the reading from Philippians, the Apostle Paul does something similar. He says that in comparison to the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord, everything else in his past he regards as loss. Indeed, he regards accomplishments and failures as "rubbish," a euphemism for the Greek *skuvala*, sometimes translated as "refuse" or "dung." It is an intentional profanity designed to shock. The best translation begins with "sh" and ends with "it."

Paul says everything else in his life is a pile of you-know-what in comparison to the value of knowing Christ, but what does it mean to know Christ? More than learning about who he is; being in a personal relationship with the One who is Savior and Lord. When a man "knows" a woman in scripture, a child is born; this too is about intimacy. But Paul goes on to say that his goal is to know the power of Jesus' resurrection *and* the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in death. We get the resurrection part. We like the idea of eternity, as well as new possibilities in this life. But to share in Christ's sufferings, by becoming like him in death... Anyone have that on your wish list?

It is a different goal. It is not the gospel of prosperity and success we often hear proclaimed. It is not positive mental attitude with a spiritual mixer — give something to God and God will hand you wealth and success. It is the way of the cross.

Jesus is headed there, there is no resurrection without crucifixion; in fact, his entire life is cruciform, sacrificial, self-giving. From the very

beginning, he empties himself into human form. Incarnation is an act of self-giving. Paul lifts up this reality as central to faith, it is a part of what he presses on toward, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead; and when Mary anoints Jesus for death, she affirms the way of the cross not just for Jesus but for all who follow him, which is why he acts out of character, siding with her and not Judas.

Perhaps this is why the pastor who baptized me made such an odd statement when I met with him several weeks before the service. “Don’t do this,” he said, “unless you absolutely have to.” Don’t be baptized? It sounds like a word of discouragement. It wasn’t. It was a reminder of what I was doing, submerging my life in not just water but the way of the cross. We need to understand that this is what we are doing.

Of course, it is one thing to know it as we begin our journey. It is another thing to remember it along the way, especially when we are tempted by other possibilities — prosperity and success, conflict avoidance and superficial peace, playing church rather than being the body of Christ. It’s why Paul talks about pressing on toward the goal, tuning out everything else, finishing the race, because it is an ongoing challenge to walk in this way of the cross.

Dana and I watched some Corgi races last week on TV. It was quite entertaining. They don’t have the longest legs to run with, but they make up for limited anatomy with strength of spirit! There was one dog named Wrong Way Loki who was aptly named. One year, he ran in the wrong direction. This year, he ran sideways at the start of the final, wiping out two other dogs. Another dog led the entire way in one race by about ten Corgi lengths but then stopped a couple feet before the finish line, thinking he was done. Corgis... you have to love them!

But in addition to being hilarious, it is a metaphor for Christian life. We don’t always have the legs we need, but we have the Spirit of Christ to help us. We often head the wrong way, affecting others, in addition to ourselves. And sometimes we think we are done — learning, growing, serving, sacrificing — when we are not. But in the end, grace abounds, faith in Christ sees us though. So may we, like Paul, press on toward the goal of sharing Christ’s sufferings, and may we, like Mary, realize that even in death, Christ is worthy our highest devotion.