

**Action or Appearances?**  
**March 21, 2010**  
**Rev. Tadd Allman-Morton**  
**Westhampton Congregational United Church of Christ**

This morning's story from the Gospel of John shows up in all four gospels. Admittedly, in Luke's Gospel, the story is split into two separate parts, but it is there nonetheless. It is unusual and exciting for any story to be represented in all four gospels. It suggests to me that this gospel story and the others which make it into all four gospels are especially important somehow. And that idea is supported by the many ways that *this* story has been represented *outside* of the Bible. It has not simply been written down and read aloud. Over the nineteen hundred and seventy-odd years since it was first told it has been made into *many* etchings. It is the topic of hundreds of paintings. It graces high churches and cathedrals in beautiful stained glass. It is lined in gold in the icons from the Eastern Orthodox Church. It even has been represented in hymns and musical works throughout the years.

Do you remember how you first encountered this story? My first encounter with this story was in song. Not in a classical rendering—as one might expect from a minister—not in some guitar-based praise song, but in good old Rock 'n' Roll. It was my second year at Simon's Rock College over in the Berkshires. I was in my friend Nancy's room enjoying some down time (which frankly was mostly how I spent my time there) and then on went the LP record *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

As I have mentioned before, I adore *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and I was hooked right away. It is in the song *Strange Thing Mystifying*, that this morning's story is told. It begins as a calm tune, with Mary and some other women seeking to soothe a tired Jesus. But then Judas lays into his critique, singing first to Mary: "Woman, your fine ointment-brand new and expensive/ Could have been saved for the poor/ Why has it been wasted? We could have raised maybe Three hundred silver pieces or more." Mid-verse, Judas turns his sights on Jesus: "People who are hungry, people who are starving/ Matter more than your feet and hair."<sup>1</sup> Moved by the power, and perhaps also by the singing, of the words of Judas, my friend Nancy commented "He is so righteous, he was right on!" And at that time I agreed with her.

It is a strange moment in the story, isn't it? Judas seems to speak in support of social action and Jesus—quite against *his usual* character—seems to be speaking from a self-centered place. He seems to be saying that it is *better* for Mary to anoint him than to raise money for the poor. And it is *a lot of money*, mind you, enough for about a year's wages for the average worker of the

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<sup>1</sup> *Jesus Christ Superstar*, "Strange Thing Mystifying", ©1970.

day. I think this story has been drawn, and sung, and made into stained glass, and told and retold for several centuries *precisely* because it catches us off guard like that.

So, what is really going on here? Is Jesus really advocating his own self care over care of the poor? Is Judas *really* claiming some sort of moral high ground here? These questions clearly concerned the author of the Gospel of John as well, because he speaks to them directly in the text. As soon as Judas is mentioned in this chapter, we are reminded of two things. First, that he is a disciple—which would seem to speak in his favor, except that John then adds “(the one who was about to betray him).”<sup>2</sup> Okay, so he may be a disciple, but he is not a good guy: got it. But then, right away, he *appears* to speak righteously when he says “Why was this perfume not sold...*and the money given to the poor?*” Again, John provides commentary to lead us away from thinking well of Judas when he writes: “(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.*)”<sup>3</sup>

So, since Judas will betray Jesus and is a thief besides, it is pretty clear that we shouldn't trust *him*. But, what do we make of Jesus saying “Leave her alone...You always have the poor with you, *but you do not always have me.*”<sup>4</sup> Isn't Jesus exalting care of his one human body over care of many poor people here? It would seem so at first glance. But I think that Jesus is really caring for Mary here.

By letting Mary care for him, Jesus embodies a ministry to the need which is directly in front of him. Judas speaks about the abstract needs of a class of people called “the poor.” Mary's need is more particular and immediate, and it is something that can be met. Mary needs to mourn Christ's passing, which is about to happen soon. The idea that Jesus would rise from the dead was an idea that he taught before his crucifixion, but that really wasn't received fully until after that first Easter Sunday. But the loss of loved ones was something to which everyone in Jesus' day could relate. Death was expected. It was a regular occurrence under the Roman Empire because the Jewish people were not passive in their oppression. They spoke their minds often. The consequence for this was severe retribution, and often execution. After the death of John the Baptist, everyone surely must have heard the drums sounding for Christ, too. Anointing Jesus helps Mary to come to peace with what is coming for Jesus. It also allows her to express a deep and abiding devotion to him.

When Mary anoints Jesus she uses her *whole body*. She *carries* the jar of perfume to Christ in her arms. She *kneels* before him. Her hands *open* the jar to pour it out and then spread out the nard. Then she wipes the ointment up with her hair. Not a cloth, but *her hair*. It is a terrifically intimate act. Mary's scent and Christ's mingle with the perfume of the nard. And their mingled

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<sup>2</sup> John 12:4b.

<sup>3</sup> John 12:6

<sup>4</sup> John 12:7, 8.

scents fill the whole house. Mary's entire being is being brought to Jesus in that action. Hers is a fully embodied faith. Just as Jesus will soon put his body on the line to save the disciples, Mary uses her body to model her faith in, and devotion to, Jesus.

Judas, by contrast, talks a good game. But he doesn't go much further than that. As the keeper of the common purse, he had to make it seem like he had everyone's best interests in mind. He had to appear like he was really interested in helping the poor while covering the fact that he was stealing from the other Disciples as well as them. Outwardly, his comment would seem to follow the ideal of Biblical prophets to care for the poor, but he only said it for the sake of appearances. As it says in this morning's other reading from the Second letter to the Corinthians, Judas is a "peddler of God's word," he literally looks to profit from appearing to be a prophet. By contrast Mary acts as a person "of sincerity... sent from God and standing in his presence."<sup>5</sup>

Standing in God's presence means that we are also fully present to God. As disciples we are indeed called to care for the poor, who are with us always. It is right and good to do so. But we are called to do so as people of sincerity who bring our whole beings before God, and don't just peddle the words of God for our own profit. And sincere ministries focus on the people directly in front of us as well as on any general group of more distant people.

We are called to use our whole bodies in our love of God. We are called to carry perfume to honor Jesus. We are called to mingle our very odor with Christ's, and to be the aroma of Christ to God. We are called to tear the bread and partake of it. We are called to pour the cup and drink it. We are called to pass through the waters of baptism into a new and sincere life with Jesus. It is through taking these actions, among many others, that we fully embody Christian Discipleship.

May we all leave appearances behind and take action to follow Christ with our whole bodies and total beings.

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> 2 Corinthians 2:17 for both quotes.

**John 12:1-8**

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 3Mary 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. 4But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” 6(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.) 7Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

**2 Corinthians 2:14-17**

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him. <sup>15</sup>For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; <sup>16</sup>to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? <sup>17</sup>For we are not peddlers of God's word like so many; but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence.