

John 12:1-8 Mary of Bethany – A woman of Extraordinary Insight and Extravagant LOVE! Rev Dr. Rod Spidahl

Women . . . I grow continually in amazement at seeing Jesus and women interact. The Bible (OT, yes!) records woman stories of note, The Book of Ruth, the Book of Esther and the story of Deborah the prophetess, as well as Jael, wife of Heber (Judges 4-5) and the Proverbs open with wisdom as a female “She stands calling [preaching] on the street corner, in the busiest places in the city she raises her voice to passersby . . . How long, simplistic ones, will you love being dull?

“Turn in here, foolish ones who need to be enlightened . . . I will pour out my words to you . . . and when calamity strikes, you will have trouble finding me because you hated instruction and loved your own words and devices . . . for the complacency of fools will destroy them . . . but if you listen to me, you will find a knowledge of God . . . whoever loves me, loves life . . .and so forth” (selections from Proverbs 1:20-2:22). And the Proverbs close with the proverbial, unnamed woman of Proverbs 31, who should not be used to lay guilt on for Mother’s Day Sermons by the way!, capping the book of wisdom.

Kenneth Bailey, one who has spent 60 years living in the Mideast, fluent in Greek, Hebrew and Arabic, notes that opinions about women actually suffered degradation in the period between the Old and New Testament, a time when there was no real prophetic word about men or women coming to God’s people. Rather than the trusted wife, house manager, investor, real estate dealer, skilled craftsman and mother of Proverbs 31, or the real person who confronts the wrong of a cowardly and leaderless Israel (Deborah) or the heroic faith of Esther in a foreign court of women or Ruth as a refugee returning with literally nothing but hope in God, the inter-testament period writers like Ben Sirach wrote that one should keep careful records of what supplies were issued to your wife, deed no property to her, realize that they are responsible for all sorts of trouble and sin (Sir 25:13-26). Bailey notes that there is the woman, Judith, a daring champion, but then, with the rabbinic movement, the good and wise voices of women were relegated to a position inferior to men. It seems they were silenced at some point and the wives of patriarchs like Sarah and Rebekah or those that composed and sang songs leading Israel, Like Miriam or those that were skilled negotiators -Abigail, a wife of David, somehow lost their voice when there was no prophetic word!

In contrast to the amazing freedom, choice and beauty given by Yahweh to women in the OT compared to the fertility cults, the harems, the female sacrifices . . . In Jesus’ exaltation of women, recorded later in the New Testament writings, comes with amazing and stunning relief to the selfish and often sex-oriented philosophies of the non-informed, non-Yahweh peoples. Like mountains rising out of the plain, the NT picks up on challenging in a subversive way, the automatic rights given to power and false male-only-ness. From the get-go in the NT, with the inclusion [and interruption] in the genealogies of Christ women of note for their FAITH (Tamar, Ruth, Rahab – Matthew 1:3,5,6) with angels visiting both men and women and finding faith more often in women, where some of the men (like Zechariah are silenced in doubt)! There are Elizabeth and of course, Anna in the temple. There is the first gospel evangelist (a Samaritan woman!) in John 3-4 who tells everyone who the Christ is and has followers she leads to meet the Messiah! Women who support the financial needs of Jesus, and show great faith (the Syro-Phoenician woman). There is no let up either, with faithful witnesses at the cross while Peter denies Jesus and other disciples flee, to the tomb, where it is women who go get the message from angels and relay them to men gone home to a mancave, or fishing on Resurrection day and announcing

the good news that HE is RISEN, call them back! In Luke 8:1-3 Jesus is shown to travel with disciples including women. There are prophetesses among the apostles in Acts, women like Lydia, women of note among the apostles like Euodia and Synticha, Acts 9:36 calls Dorcas MATHETRIA or disciple (feminine form). Women are among those who spoke in tongues, or were baptized in households, testifying of God's greatness and so forth and so on. . . And the first evangelist of the Gospels, the woman at the well, who had most of a whole village believing in Jesus because of what she said of the Christ! What we see here is an operation of the prophetic, the work of the spirit, without gender is the spirit given, without a certain again, without a certain class or even a certain theological level of study . . . The all are given the Spirit, as it is written "I will pour my spirit on all people, your sons and daughters will prophecy, young men will see visions and old men dream dreams! Especially on my servants, men AND women, I will pour out abundantly my spirit and they will prophecy!

And this Woman was one of extravagant love who also was acting in the true prophetic sense of the word . . . but first let us say a bit about extravagance!

Extravagance! When it came time to buy her BFF Beyonce a baby shower gift recently, Kelly Rowland didn't head to the aisles of Babies 'R' Us. Nope, according to ABC News, the former Destiny's Child star went way more upscale than that and purchased her friend's unborn child a Swarovski-crystal studded Baby Diamond Bathtub worth \$5,200! Or, Beyonce spent more than \$5 million on a watch: A birthday present for hubby Jay Z! She bought her man a luxury Hublot watch named the Big Bang-- with 1,282 diamonds on it. A source said: "Beyoncé will always buy Jay the best gifts money can buy. Money is no object to her." She knew he would love the Hublot Big Bang watch. It's the ultimate timepiece, a mixture of extravagance, luxury and bling.

African car story, donated to Missionary Revne, a family in Wisconsin had been saving for a car but donated this to Revne, later as he was driving it the water coolant overheated, attracting a medicine man famous in the area ... this person was won to Christ and resulted in a huge response to the Gospel in the Yagoua area of N Cameroon. What does a gift do?

Robert of Swan Lake gave me about \$1200 after my presentation on needing money for a well at the newly formed Harvestor Bible school (this was in 1991) with that we were able to build a well on a site that has now graduated over 100 evangelists and workers in a largely Muslim area. Gifts – they should show love and give life! But, Jesus talks about his death and she gives this to a person who will soon die, why?

Here in John 12:1-8, we have Jesus invited back to Bethany, the place where Jesus raised Lazarus, brother of Mary and Martha . . . and this is the Mary who totally defies Jewish tradition of the day (as her sister Martha reminds her) and instead of peeling potatoes in the kitchen, she SITS at the feet of Rabbi Jesus, indicating she is a disciple-remember that it is said of Paul in Acts 22:3 that "he sat at the feet of Gamaliel." And, to add insult to the injury of whatever misconceptions were running through false views of relegating women to a lower or inferior status to men, Jesus commends Mary and her role in no uncertain terms!! Bailey says that in using the expression, she has chosen the "good portion" there is a play on words for this can mean the best portion of food in a meal! "Jesus is defending Mary of Bethany's right to become his disciple and to continue in "theological studies".

Mary the sister of Lazarus and Martha had a superb and courageous, loving faith and its positive effect

on the uplifting of women as valued disciples, against the prevailing attitudes of men and women of her time are beyond compare and certainly to be emulated! And today, we hear how God used a woman to do an extravagant act and give a hilariously generous gift to Jesus to show her love—and be commended forever because of it! Wow- I just love a real view of real life through the eyes of our Jesus! Let's go into it!

John 12:1-8

Vs 1-2 Similar accounts in Mark 14:3-9 and Matt 26:6-13 give Bethany as location but have variations in the time, who said what, and other details but here we have Lazarus, Mary, Martha and Jesus, with the disciples in the house of Simon the Leper. This is not the same woman who wept on Jesus' feet and dried them with her hair in Luke 7:36 for that account occurs about one year earlier at a different house in another place.

John 12:3 – Nard as an ointment was extracted from the root and stem of a plant native to the Himalayas of India growing at 3000-5000 meters- hence the great value of transporting this to Palestine. Matthew says it is “exceedingly valuable”, Mark “very costly”. The aromatic oil was used as a perfumed cosmetic, stored in alabaster boxes and only opened on special occasions for people of great honor! The Greek adjective “PISTIKOS” means it was not a “knock-off” but the genuine article! (See Eerdman's Dictionary of the Bible, 2000, p 948)

Why did Mary have this? The obvious answer is best – she purchased it to honor Jesus. This would agree with the comment in Matthew that what she has done, outlandish, unprecedented and hilariously liberal in giving will “be always spoken of as a memorial whenever the Gospel is preached.” From all Gospel accounts 12 fluid oz (pound of water) were used on Jesus hair, head, beard, neck and shoulders as well as his feet. This is perfumed oil . . . it doesn't stay in one spot! All the more contrast that it is the FEET John's account focuses on! Mary was a disciple, to sit at the feet of a Rabbi was the normal place for a male disciple, but not a female one, but Jesus accepted it as well as the rich anointing! While the translators RSV do not follow the hint, John repeats FEET twice just so we get it the amazing valuable nard oil put on Jesus' FEET!! Not only that but she loosens her hair and uses it to wipe his feet . . . Now get the picture, in Corinthians we hear that any woman who prays or prophesies with her hair uncovered or “down and loose” is doing something dishonorable! (1 Cor 11:5). Others report that Jewish women did not “put down their hair in public” . . . this is an amazing sign of devotion to Jesus and her devotion and its essence literally fills and permeates the room.

But now let us talk again about the act of anointing a live person with something typically reserved for the dead-expensive NARD! We can see from the next verse and other accounts of the same incident that there was a horse-snorting sort of disapproval (YES, the word used in Mark 14:5 is one that is used of horses snorting and neighing in concern! (*Greek -EMBRIMAOMAI*))

Why was Jesus the subject of this anointing by Mary? One can only credit Mary's faith and the Power of the Spirit. Note well, Jesus was GOING to be executed as a CRIMINAL. Criminals are the only ones who did not receive any anointing or honor (although God say fit to have Jesus be placed in a rich man's tomb but remember that the women were going early in the morning to anoint Jesus with spices (Mark16:1) When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. And, Luke 23:55 states, The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it.

⁵⁶ Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment.

So Mary of Bethany, filled with a sense of the true mission of Jesus and rightly a disciple who understood what he had begun to say, that at Passover, that is in a few days, he would be crucified

Vs 4 – Judas is mentioned in John but Matthew notes others came along on this and Mark simply records that there were sounds of indignation, disapproval, judgment and murmuring in the crowd “among themselves” of course! Where do we stand? This is a bit like David dancing with unparalleled joy in front of the Ark when it returns- in only his Speedo’s! Really?!?

12:5 – Three hundred denarii (about one year’s wages) A denarius was a silver coin weighing 3.6 grams. In the good Samaritan parable, two denarii were left to cover the expenses of the stay in the Inn as well as the costs of ointment, bandages and care. Here it is Judas objecting but all the disciples bemoaned this waste according to Matthew 26:8-9, and expressed anger at the wastefulness. We, too, would have done the same.

In various ways, but decidedly, Jesus rebukes those who claim to have the poor at heart as they want only to gather in the monies . . . almsgiving was a custom before Passover, perhaps it does take the sting out of some people’s conscience to give a bit before religious festivals.

But like the woman who gave two small coins, Mary of Bethany preached a whole sermon, no, she spoke volumes without a word uttered . . . only the prophetic act. And every picture does tell a story, as Rod Stewart sang! Here Mary strikes a chord with all artists, all who work with pictures, metaphors, painting, drawing, sculpture! She is an artist at work, being moved not by the opinions of men or women in power but by the spirit of the gospel!

Ecclesiastes 6:11-7:2 The more the words, the less the meaning, and how does that profit anyone? For who knows what is good for a man in life, during the few and meaningless days he passes through like a shadow? Who can tell him what will happen under the sun after he is gone? A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth. It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart.

The hymn writer captures it well “not with swords loud clashing, nor roll of stirring drums; but in deeds of love and mercy, the heavenly kingdom comes!” Perhaps if we thought less of our own safety, what others think, less of the political fallout, we too could enter the prophetic actions of those who testify of Jesus! What Mary did, she did out of faith, in the face of fear and consternation of those in control When we welcome the kingdom, we welcome the opportunity to do something of great significance, often on the edge of what others call “proper.” In one account, Jesus calls her act “beautiful” It has been said, “All things beautiful are as difficult as they are rare!”

Oh friends of Jesus gathered here, shall we live prophetically? *At this I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, "Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy (Rev 19:10).*

As God is doing a new thing, do we perceive it?