

John 12: 1-8 Anointing

In John's gospel we have several events recorded that are not found in the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. John's gospel is also unique as it refers to certain described events as signs; signs which should cause belief in those who see or know about them. John also describes other events found in the synoptic as works. The signs should be sufficient for the recognition that Jesus is the Messiah or Anointed One of God. The first sign given according to John's gospel was when Jesus turned the water in the jars at the wedding in Cana to wine. Not only wine, but the best and most fragrant one offered at the wedding. Between then and the last sign given there are five others like the feeding of the five thousand which are found in all the gospels. Each sign is more revealing in scope or demonstration of power and in the number of witnesses to the event. The last of seven signs found in John is the raising of Lazarus which occurs in John 11. Chapter 11 is a very detailed account of this sign. It gives specifics about where Jesus is, how he hears about Lazarus' illness and his response before going to Bethany. When Jesus announces he will indeed go into Judea the disciples warn him this will likely mean his death. John's gospel makes it clear that Jesus is in control of coming events which he has continually referred to as "his hour". Jesus goes to Bethany and raises Lazarus before many witnesses in a dramatic manner. Immediately after raising Lazarus, we are told that the authorities determine Jesus must die and he no longer goes about openly but withdraws with his disciples to an area near the wilderness. When John introduces the story of Lazarus' raising, he includes in the first verse information that it was Lazarus' sister Mary who sent the message but also identified her as the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair. This identifying comment indicates that John and his community already know about the events narrated in today's text. It also lets us know that there is something significant occurring. John tells us that despite knowing he is in danger, Jesus has come back to Bethany, the sight of his last and most powerful sign to spend an evening with his friends: Mary, Martha, and the recently raised from the dead Lazarus. These friends are giving a dinner for him. We aren't told how many of the disciples are present. Since chapter 11 ended with Jesus and his disciples together going into the wilderness area probably they all came back together. Judas Iscariot has a speaking part later in the passage so we know for sure that he was there. The scene described is Martha serving the group and Lazarus sitting at the table eating with Jesus. Mary comes in and taking a pound of costly perfume, made of pure nard, anoints Jesus' feet, drying them with her hair. She uses the perfume so abundantly that the aroma fills the entire house. Nard is not something with which we are familiar, except for reference in scripture. It is called spikenard in the KJV and was an ointment imported in alabaster boxes from the Himalayas. The scarcity accounted for its extreme cost, cost so high that in Mark we are told that the price was 300 denarii. That was comparable to the average yearly income of a worker. To use that amount of resource in such a way seems wasteful. Judas makes his comment about how it would have been better to spend the money to aid the poor. John inserts the aside that Judas' true concern is not for the poor. John identifies Judas as both a thief and the one who will betray Jesus. Since Jesus' betrayal was not by a stranger, but by one of his own disciples, many interpretation focus on this portion of the passage. The synoptic gospels record this comment about the perfume used, but attribution of the statement varies as does the name of the woman. However, all accounts agree that Judas Iscariot is the betrayer. The synoptic use

this as a reason the Judas will move toward betrayal. John takes a more direct approach. He will later narrate that Satan entered Judas during their last meal, but was prevented from acting until Jesus gave him permission to carry out the betrayal. That being the case, it doesn't seem that the point of this text is meant to be about Judas' identity as betrayer. In response to Judas' comment, Jesus defends and commends Mary's actions. "Jesus said, 'Leave her alone.'" Mary's actions were unexpected and extravagant. As we remember from John's account of Jesus' last meal with his disciples in Jerusalem, Jesus himself washed the feet of the disciples. When he did this it was a shocking event. There were few means of transportation and the majority of going places was by walking, and footwear if present was open sandals. Feet got dirty. It was the duty of slaves or servants to wash the feet of guests before they ate. This was not something that someone important did. However, as a woman, it would not have been unexpected for Mary to perform this act of service if washing was what she had done. But the verse clearly tells us that Mary took the perfumed ointment and anointed Jesus' feet. Anointing is not washing. Anointing is not something done to someone's feet. The current standard definition of anointing is to rub or put ointment on, often in a ceremony of consecration. The dictionary of Biblical terms expands on this definition. There you find that anointing did involve aromatic substances, usually oils, not ointments. They were poured over the head and were a sign of investing someone or something with power. Kings and priest were anointed. The Tabernacle and its furnishings were anointed. Samuel refers to Israel's king as the Lord's anointed which eventually became the Hebrew term Messiah. Anointing in that culture was done by men to other men. It was a sign of importance and rank. Jesus' comment on what Mary is doing is "She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." If the perfume was for Jesus' burial, why is Mary using it now? Jesus' burial will not occur for another week. Jesus is thinking of his imminent death while sitting at the table with the one he had reclaimed from death. Both life and death are represented at this table. Mary is ministering to him with extravagance. This is sometimes seen as related to recognition of Jesus as the Messiah or Anointed One. In using it now Mary is seen as announcing the nearness of Jesus' death. She is ministering to him while she is able. John is portraying Mary as a beloved disciple of Jesus. By wiping Jesus' feet Mary also prefigures the time when Jesus will wipe the feet of his disciples. Her actions anticipate what Jesus will later do. This reveals her as a model disciple, as she is showing a unity with Jesus' actions and reflects his command. John's gospel is a narrative about opposites. It seems that is the picture John is drawing in this scene. Jesus is facing death; Lazarus has just been raised from the dead. Mary, a woman and friend ministers extravagantly out of love while Judas a chosen disciple views her act through the lens of selfish greed. Lavish devotion is contrasted to critical stinginess. Mary and Judas contrast true and false discipleship. Because of Jesus' words, Mary's action portrays not the anointing of Jesus as King or Messiah, but as the anointing of a corpse. Into this action of anointing is brought the reality of the imminent and ugly death of crucifixion. John however, does not give Mary's motivation is. It seems unreasonable to assume that she knew or could understand all that will happen to Jesus or all that her actions will evoke. Yet her actions resonate deeply with what we know of Jesus' kingship and his death. Mary is acting out her discipleship of service. The comment about the poor always being present has been seen as a callous view of poverty and an excuse by some for failure to act. When Jesus says, "You always have the poor with you,"

Jesus does not diminish the seriousness of poverty. It is always there. This does not affect the imperative for charity. Possibly Jesus is referring as he often did to the scripture he knew. In Deuteronomy 15:11, the people are commanded to show generosity toward the poor precisely “since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth.” Jesus, looking toward his death, contrasts his impending departure with the perennial opportunity to serve the poor. This dinner party reveals profound answers to life’s deepest questions because even as death is the backstory and death is foreshadowed within this passage, so is resurrection. The backstory of course is Lazarus as exhibit A. He had been dead three days after all yet here he is hosting a dinner. Lazarus will die again, but his presence at this table is evidence of the death-defying power of God who always has the final word. Resurrection looms here too. In Mary’s anointing of Jesus as if for burial occurring before death there is the indication of urgency. Jesus will not be dead for long. Death hems us in before and behind in this story, but resurrection breaks its barriers and ascends to the very right hand of God in heaven. Death is pervasive, but resurrection is invasive. God is death defying and always has the last word. This party where Martha is yet again serving and Mary is yet again at Jesus’ feet and Lazarus is yet again alive and the disciples are yet again listening reveals more about the meaning of life in the midst of death. It reveals what matters most in this in-between time as we await the second coming. It reveals our various roles and our purpose as we struggle with meaning and priorities and values. It reveals we are to serve Jesus. We are to love Jesus. We are to listen to Jesus. Not a bad list to hold up daily as we ask ourselves life’s most challenging questions. Don’t save the best for later, use it now on the ones who may not have a tomorrow. Forget about hoarding money in the purse, share it with the poor because they are Jesus, too. Serve willingly, love extravagantly because you have listened attentively and know that while death is everywhere, resurrection comes out of nowhere because our God is death defying and always has the final word and that word is Good News. Thanks be to God.