

Good Advice
John 12:1-8
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April 6, 2025

Good leaders need Good advisors. If you're in charge of a nation, or a movement, or really any organization, you can't do everything yourself. You have to surround yourself with people you can trust, people who will see things from a different perspective, notice factors you might not have considered, and give you good advice based on their assessment of the situation. You need people who will be honest with you, who will tell you things that might be hard for you to hear, people with integrity who will say the truth, even if it's unpopular, even if it causes you trouble. Good advisors are worth their weight in gold, and if you've got people like that giving you advice, you'd be a fool not to listen.

Judas Iscariot thinks he's that kind of advisor – wise, principled, thoughtful, the kind of indispensable right-hand man any king would be grateful to have working for them, working with them. Judas believes, or at least, he acts like he believes, that Jesus is the King, the Messiah, the promised successor to the throne of King David, the one who will re-establish Israel as the greatest nation in the entire world, and that makes Judas one of the King's inner circle, one of his trusted advisors, someone who is supposed to help Jesus make tough decisions and navigate tricky situations, someone who can be counted on for their wisdom and foresight and shrewd, sensible guidance.

So of course, when Judas sees Mary's display of love and devotion for Jesus, anointing his feet with costly perfume, wiping them clean with her hair, of course sensible, prudent Judas is going to speak up and give Jesus some good, common sense advice.

And to be fair to Judas for just a moment, he does actually have a point. There are some very good reasons why what Mary does is not a good thing. First of all, there is the issue of decorum. What Mary does for Jesus is at least a little bit scandalous for an unmarried woman to do to an unmarried man. It's a pretty intimate action, anointing his feet with this fragrant perfume, wiping them with her hair – this is the kind of activity that you expect to see in Cosmo magazine, not in the Gospels. It's perfectly reasonable to worry that if word of this ever got out, Jesus might have a hard time explaining Mary's actions as a purely platonic gesture of devotion and not something a little more risqué. So you can understand why Jesus' disciples, his advisors, might want to protect him from any whiff of scandal by shuffling off Mary into a side room and pretending the whole smelly business never happened. If you care about decorum, then what Mary did was a bad idea.

But apparently, the decorum of Mary's action wasn't Judas' first concern, because it wasn't the complaint he lodged with Jesus. More than the impropriety of Mary's action, Judas is bothered by the impracticality of what Mary has done. Mary uses a pound of costly perfume, an incredibly precious and valuable substance, to anoint Jesus feet. This is top quality stuff we're talking about here – this isn't your garden-variety Axe body spray, this

perfume is so powerful and so potent that the smell of it fills the entire house. According to Judas, they could've made three hundred denarii from the perfume if they'd sold it, which is almost the amount of money an average labourer would've earned in an entire year – so this is some really, really expensive perfume. What Mary is doing is so extravagant, so wasteful, that Judas just has to speak up, because she is throwing away something precious, something valuable, something that could have been sold and the money used for something really worthwhile, like feeding the poor – and that would've fed a lot of poor people. So if Mary really wanted to do something nice for Jesus, why not just bake him some muffins, or send him a nice card – or if you're going to anoint him with perfume, just pull a few of those free samples you get out of the magazines and just use that, it'll work just the same without wasting so much money. Do something simple, do something cheap, be practical, be frugal, be sensible. If you're the least bit financially responsible, then what Mary did is a bad idea.

Of course, the author of the gospel of John isn't quite as charitable towards Judas as I've been so far. According to the gospel, the reason Judas speaks up isn't because he cares about Jesus' reputation, or because he cares about the poor. It's because Judas cares only about himself. Judas was the group's treasurer, keeping the common purse, and apparently he was dipping into the treasury for his own expenses, and so when Judas saw that perfume, he wasn't thinking about how many groceries and warm meals he could serve to the local homeless community, he was thinking about all the things he

could buy for himself with all that money. 300 denarii might be enough for Judas to ditch this entire movement and set up shop for himself, leave Jesus and the other eleven to their parables and healings, run off and buy a little place on the coast where he can retire. So when Judas gives his advice to Jesus, it isn't actually about decorum, and it isn't actually about financial responsibility. It's about control. It's about Judas wanting more control, more resources, more say over what happens in his life, it's about Judas wanting to be able to call his own shots and be his own king instead of following Jesus around any longer. What Judas wants more than anything is control, and when Mary anoints Jesus with that perfume, Judas sees a lost opportunity to gain more control, more influence, more power over the people and the world around him. If you care about control, then what Mary did is a bad idea.

But Jesus doesn't care about decorum. And he doesn't care about financial prudence. And he doesn't care about control. All the reasons Judas gives, and all the reasons Judas doesn't give, for why Mary's action was wrong, Jesus doesn't listen, not for a second, because Jesus sees Mary's action completely differently from the way Judas sees it. Where Judas sees a breach of decorum, or a wasteful expenditure, or a lost opportunity for gain, Jesus sees an act of love, an extravagant, passionate outpouring of devotion from a woman who just wants to show Jesus how deeply she loves him. It's important to remember what's happening in the gospel of John when this story takes place. Just before this story, Jesus went to Bethany to meet Mary

and Martha because their brother Lazarus had died, and Jesus went to the tomb and called to Lazarus, called him out of the grave, and Lazarus came back to life. And immediately after this story, Jesus and his disciples will gather in Jerusalem for the Passover meal, and Jesus will wash their feet and tell them that on that very night, he will be arrested and handed over to be killed. And right here in this moment, right after Jesus has displayed his power over life and death, and right before Jesus sets that power down and willingly goes to the cross to die, Mary decides to show Jesus just how much she loves him. Maybe it's out of gratitude for bringing her brother back from the dead. Maybe Mary already knows that Jesus won't be with her for much longer. But whatever it is, in that moment, Mary knows that nothing else in the world matters to her, not control, not decorum, not financial stability, in that moment, all that matters to her is Jesus, and so she pours her love out for him in this extravagant gift. Mary gets it right; she sees through everything else, and she recognizes that nothing else matters except Jesus Christ; nothing else matters except the love of Jesus Christ, his love for her, her love for him. She is willing to put everything else aside, all practical considerations, all long term plans, all propriety and sensibility, she puts it all aside and just focuses on loving Jesus Christ.

Now, I have to admit, that when I think of the church, when I think of myself, I'm afraid that most of the time, I act a lot more like Judas than I act like Mary. So often, we act as if the church is all about decorum, all about making sure people are doing the right thing, saying the right thing, behaving in the proper manner with the proper etiquette and judging anyone who doesn't live up to our standards. Or we act as if the church is all about financial responsibility, as if the entire purpose of everything we do is just to make sure we make enough money so we can keep on doing it, so we can't take a risk or do something extravagant because we're always afraid that there won't be enough to survive. And sometimes, we act like the church is just about control, making this world safe for people who look and act like us, we use the infrastructure and resources of this powerful organization to make sure we stay comfortable, we stay in power, we have control. All too often the Judas part of me speaks up and tells me that the church is all about me, about what I want for it, what I want from it, but that's just not true. The purpose of the church, the point of everything we do, it's not about me. It's not about you. It's not about any of us. It's all about Jesus Christ. It's all about the love of Jesus Christ, his love for us, our love for him. Christianity isn't about doing the right thing, it isn't about good deeds or proper decorum, it isn't about control. It's about a relationship, a relationship with the God who created us, the God who died to set us free from sin and death, the God who rose to new life so we can live forever with him. All of this here, and everything we do, all of it exists for one purpose, and one purpose only, so

that we can get a little bit closer to Jesus every single day, so we can discover again each morning how blessed we are to be loved by God, so we can demonstrate through our words and actions how grateful we are that Jesus Christ brought us back to life. Today and everyday, we are called to follow Mary's example and love extravagantly, love Jesus Christ with everything we have, love Jesus without worry about what people might think, love Jesus with just a fraction of the depth and height and infinite power with which Jesus Christ has loved us. And then, as we fall deeper and deeper in love with Jesus Christ, then we will start to let that love overflow out into the world, to all the people around us, so they too can discover how good it is to be loved by Jesus, how good it is to share his love with the world. Today, may we love as we have been loved, love without limits, love without reservation, love without end. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.