

# The Park Road Pulpit

*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*

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## **- What Do Tears and Perfume Have in Common?**

**John 12.1-8**

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She seemed to always have a knack for choosing the better part. She knew when to sit and listen and learn. She knew when to speak. She knew how to express her feelings – raw emotion even – in ways that impacted his decisions and actions. Mary understood Jesus, and she was self-aware as well. Martha may have been the busy one – the “hostess with the mostest” – but it was Mary that knew how to do, and Jesus was moved by her. I want to be like Mary when I grow up, but not for the reasons that most folks would think. There are conferences and seminars and books for women all over the country – I’ve even been the featured speaker at one – whose theme is something along the lines of “Being a Mary in a Martha Stewart World.” These conferences are designed to teach women to slow down and spend more time in personal devotion and quiet time to tend to their souls – teaching women to sit at the feet of Jesus a little more often than dithering in the kitchen. Good words and important thoughts, but if that is all you think of Mary, then I don’t think you’ve paid very close attention to her life. Martha was the one cooking and cleaning and criticizing her sister Mary for not knowing her proper place in the kitchen as a good southern woman, while Mary spent her time sitting at the feet of Jesus soaking in all of his wisdom and passion. I don’t want to be like Mary so that I can do less of the household chores and do more of the sitting at the feet of Jesus. I want to be like Mary because she understood who Jesus was and she knew how to respond to him.

Mary knew how to be present for Jesus. Mary understood what tears and perfume had in common.

We are traveling through this Lenten journey and today's theme for self-reflection has to do with how we are present for one another. I fear that many of us travel through our day-to-day lives pretty self-engrossed. We have our own problems and our own issues and our own schedules and our own lives to lead. And we fall right into the rat-race without carving out very much time to even be aware of others that cross our paths. And if we are aware of them, we see them as obstacles to be hurdled or avoided. Truth be known, when we ask someone how they are doing, we are secretly praying, "Let them say `Fine,'" because we don't have time to deal with their truth. The real truth be known, when we ask someone how they are doing we aren't really even listening for their answer. We know they'll say, "Fine. How are you?" It's like we've been trained in that conversation the same way we were trained for "Thank You/You're Welcome." We tend to be either too busy or too self-absorbed or too tired to deal with the burdens or the joys of others. At this point in our Lenten journey, let us confess that we often don't practice the presence of God very well.

But Mary did. I'll tell you exactly what tears and perfume have in common. We've got to go back one chapter in John's gospel to get it though. In chapter 11, Mary's brother Lazarus is sick. Mary and her sister Martha send for Jesus. But Jesus did not come right away. As a matter of fact he stayed on where he was for two more days before deciding to come see about his beloved friend Lazarus. As Jesus was coming into town – in typical Mary/Martha fashion, Martha hustled out to meet Jesus on his way into town while Mary stayed home. Martha gives Jesus a little tiny piece of her mind: "If you had

been here, he wouldn't have died. Now do something Jesus." Jesus reassures her that Lazarus is going to be alright, and Martha believes him – going even over the top in her affirmation as she pronounces high Messianic accolades upon Jesus: *"Yes Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."* (John 11.27) And then Jesus asks for Mary. And that Martha, there she goes trotting back to the house to get Mary (she was always running around like that): "The Teacher is here, and he's asking for you!" And with that Mary goes to Jesus who is still just on the outskirts of town. And upon seeing Jesus, she falls to the ground at his feet and she cries.

I know the feeling of such deep sadness and grief that your knees buckle underneath you as soon as you see someone that you love. With this One, she is perfectly safe to fall apart. He will not judge her. He will not dismiss her. He will not ignore her. He will not avoid her. He will be present for her. And right then and there, outside the city limits of Bethany, Mary anointed Jesus' feet with her tears. And in perhaps one of the most emotional scenes in all of the gospels, Mary had a huge impact on Jesus. "If you had been here, Lazarus wouldn't have died," she sobbed. And when Jesus felt her tears fall onto his feet he practiced the presence of God and cried right along with her.

Fast forward to chapter 12 of John's gospel and Martha is doing what Martha does best – hosting a dinner party. Martha is scurrying about in the kitchen. Lazarus is reclined at the table with Jesus. I'm guessing it was a grand occasion. And Mary. Mary decides that it is time for extravagant celebration. She opens up her finest and most expensive thing she owns – perfume – and anoints Jesus' feet. And the whole house smelled to high heaven – pun intended! She gets ridiculed for such wasteful extravagance until Jesus says, "Leave her alone." Again she seems to have chosen the better part. It's

the beginning of Jesus' darkest hours, and Mary practices the presence of God in the pouring out of the perfume.

So, here's what tears and perfume have in common: they are real and tangible ways to practice the presence of God. We need to be attentive to when we need to anoint one another with tears and when we need to be extravagant in the ways that we anoint one another with perfume. We are often too consumed with ourselves to be freely giving away our tears and our perfume. Shedding tears makes us vulnerable and wears us out, and we are too greedy with our time and money to be so lavish with our perfume.

In our Lenten confession let us admit that we live more by our calendars than by the story of the people of God. I still remember the lecture from a seminary professor that we should only schedule 80% of our time. We should leave 20% of our workday unscheduled so that we could be prepared for the unexpected – for God often comes during the unexpected. I find that God rarely shows up for the things on my schedule that are marked urgent because God is out there tending to the important more than the urgent. We keep ourselves so scheduled with urgent things and then when something important crosses our path, we are already booked.

Just this past week, I received two phone calls – each from young mothers who are juggling the craziness of life's schedule. They called to check on me. To laugh with me. To make sure that I am ok. Their time was their perfume, and they anointed me with it lavishly. Just this past week, I sat at the bedside of one who is dying to give a respite break to her family. I cleaned her dry lips with a warm cloth and put ointment on them. I massaged her hands with lotion. I fed her lunch. When her family returned they apologized for taking my time. "I know how busy you are," they said. It hurt me to hear

them say that. That I would project such a “busy” life that they felt they were taking too much of my precious time should be my Lenten confession. “This is exactly why I got into this profession in the first place,” I assured them, “this is why I do what I do.” I anointed her with a warm cloth and lotion and food, but sadly, that is not the norm for me.

I don’t think I’m the only one. Some folks here today need to anoint their families with tears and perfume. Those folks spend way too much time in the office or traveling or building a career or a bank account, and they are missing what’s happening at home. Some folks are so wrapped up in the lives of their children making sure that they have and do EVERYTHING that they are unaware that there is a world of hurt all around them. They are so consumed with themselves that they have turned a blind eye to the pain of the world. Some folks have lost their capacity for compassion. And some folks are simply too stingy and greedy to be lavish. And it is so tempting to sit here and put names and faces to each of these scenarios when the truth is that each of us could fill in our names to each category at some time or another.

God, forgive us for not knowing what tears and perfume have in common. “In Mary, the reader is given a picture of the fullness of the life of discipleship. Her act shows forth the love that will be the hallmark of discipleship . . . the recognition of Jesus’ identity that is the decisive mark of Christian life . . . The power of the witness of Mary’s discipleship in this story is that she knows how to respond to Jesus without being told. She fulfills Jesus’ love commandment before he even teaches it . . . Discipleship is defined by acts of love and one’s response to Jesus . . . Discipleship in the Fourth Gospel does not conform to some of the church’s stereotypical assumptions about the

composition of Jesus' circle of disciples . . . Jesus' disciples are persons, like Mary, whom he loved and who loved him and lived out that love." (New Interpreter's, page 703)

Fred Craddock reminds us that "We may never know . . . what lives are influenced, what differences are made because God takes a word spoken, a gift given, a hand extended, an effort expended, and gives it a life and a power far beyond the intention and expectation that prompted it. [When Mark relays this story about Mary and the perfume he says] of this act in Bethany, *'Wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.'*" (Mark 14.9) (Preaching Through the Christian Year, Year C, Fred B. Craddock., page 164)

So let us remember this day that tears and perfume have much in common. So may we shed them compassionately and pour it lavishly that God's presence might be known through us. May it be so.