

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

The Smell of Generosity
John 12.1-8
March 21, 2010
Amy Jacks Dean



In writing a sermon, a good introduction is key – something that grabs your attention and pulls you in. A good introduction needs a good story or a poignant illustration to capture one’s imagination. A good introduction entices folks in and engages them in the rest of the sermon. With a good introduction, a sermon is off to a good start and can really go places. So, here’s my sermon introduction for today: I am in a complete conundrum in dealing with this text. It’s one of those feel good stories of the Bible. Just when you think you really get Jesus, he throws us a curve, but in this scene instead of feeling “oh silly me, I should have guessed that Jesus would be honored with Mary’s lavish gift of perfume anointing . . . that Mary, she’s just great, she always gets it right . . . Mary has shown generosity beyond measure and that is how I should be.” Instead of feeling that way, the truth is that I resonate with Judas. Oh, I hope I wouldn’t have been in his camp of “those easily bribed to turn Jesus in to the authorities” – but in this scene, I can’t get past the thought that I agree with Judas. So this sermon introduction doesn’t begin with any cutesy story or fun illustration. This introduction is a confession of sorts. I agree with Judas, and that, my friends, is called a conundrum.

Let’s set our scene and see if we can make any sense out of this. In the previous chapter of John’s gospel, Lazarus is sick and his sisters, Mary and Martha, are worried sick. They send for Jesus, but he takes his sweet time in arriving, and in the meantime, Lazarus dies. Maybe not the best pastoral care moment for Jesus. When Martha gets word that Jesus is on his way, she runs out to meet him. She’s grief-stricken and probably beside herself saying things like *if you*

had been here this wouldn't have happened – do something, Jesus. Anyone that has known grief knows exactly what she is feeling. Begging, pleading – anything that might change this outcome. I know exactly what that feels like. And in this moment, Martha makes the most bold statement of belief of anyone in the whole New Testament. When asked if she believed, Martha professed more than belief. She claims Jesus as the Christ – the Son of the God. It's a Messianic pronouncement. And in this scene, the Messiah weeps right along with Mary and Martha over the death of their friend and brother. And you guessed it, Lazarus lives. And this upsets the religious order, and Jesus kinda goes undercover for a bit. But as the Passover is on the horizon, Jesus and his disciples make their way to Jerusalem and stop over in Bethany for a party in Jesus' honor. Lazarus is alive, and Mary and Martha (probably mostly Martha) host a "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow" party for Jesus. They owed him so much. They owed him the very life of their brother. And so as Martha busies herself in the kitchen, showing her own generosity of hospitality as she makes sure that everything for this party is just right, Mary slips out to go get a great treasure. It's not gold or frankincense or myrrh, but it is a fragrance of unbelievable Generosity. This bottle must be something comparable to gallons of Chanel No. 5. Its value is worth a year's wages for the common laborer. And Mary cracks it open and pours it all – ALL – on Jesus' feet. "Everyone in the room watches her. She does four remarkable things in a row. First she loosens her hair in a room full of men, which an honorable woman never does. Then she pours perfume on Jesus' feet, which is also not done. The head, maybe--people do that to kings--but not the feet. Then she touches him--a single woman rubbing a single man's feet--also not done, not even among friends. Then she wipes the perfume off with her hair--totally inexplicable--the bizarre end to an all around bizarre act." (from Barbara Brown Taylor's sermon The Prophet Mary)

And Judas pipes up with my sentiments exactly: HAVE YOU LOST YOUR MIND, MARY? Now I know that the parenthetical phrase explains that Judas was not interested in generosity as much as he was interested in greed, but even if his motives were off the mark – he asks a good question – *why was this perfume not sold and the money given to the poor?* The smell must have overpowered that room as mightily as the stench of Lazarus’s death had consumed them some time before. As Jesus had approached Lazarus’s tomb, Mary had warned Jesus of the smell. Now, some days or weeks later, Mary offers the Smell of Generosity in place of the Smell of Death.

Now all the commentaries spend a great deal of time connecting this lavish and extravagant anointing to a pre-burial ritual that Jesus would not receive in his own death which at this point was just a little over one week away. And that works as we look back on the whole story. This is literary foreshadowing at its best. But in the moment, I don’t think Mary was thinking anything beyond the moment. I wonder. Why would she have had such an expensive treasure in the first place? How was it that she afforded this, and how did they live beyond the paycheck to paycheck mode where she was never forced to sell it to pay their own bills? Was this a spontaneous act or, as Martha prepared for the dinner party, had Mary planned this presentation of love and generosity all along? Did Lazarus and Martha know that Mary had this perfume in her possession? And did they know what their sister was about to do with it? Had this been a gift to Mary or had she purchased it herself? I wonder. And I wonder . . . if Jesus was the Social Gospel preacher that I believe him to have been, how could he have reprimanded Judas for asking the obvious and good question? Jesus says – *Leave her alone . . . you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.*

Now Jesus is speaking the truth, for here we sit, Jesus not physically in our midst, and yet the poor are still with us. Perhaps, against my better judgment, Mary did the right thing in the moment. But. But. The poor we have with us, and they are just waiting for our lavish, extravagant Generosity. Glen Beck has gotten on my nerves. I want Hugh Ashcraft to make us a banner with big, big letters that reads WE ARE A SOCIAL JUSTICE CHURCH. If you've not paid attention lately, Fox News pundit, Glen Beck has been on a rant about churches that promote social justice – calling us communists and encouraging people to get away from churches like ours. Now I know, he is nothing but an entertainer, really. But he has made me mad. He has stirred the pot, and I'm sure he is enjoying the stew of ridicule and hype and frenzy that he has created. And in the midst of my mad at Glen Beck, I have to read that Judas, of all people, makes more social justice sense than Mary or Jesus. Now how am I supposed to deal with that?! It's been a conundrum, I tell you.

I'm working my way through this dilemma with the Smell of Generosity – *the house was filled with the fragrance* – it says. I want this house – this sanctuary - to be filled with the Smell of Generosity. I want us to break out our very best smelling stuff and pour it all over the feet of those that Jesus said we would always have with us. It was Jesus that said when he was no longer around, the poor would always be with us, and I can't help but wonder if that's where he meant for us to start with our Generosity. When I think about the fact that I've gone to Barnes and Noble every time another Harry Potter book hit the shelves to buy the hardback copy for our boys – and the same for the Lightening Thief and Eragon series – and yet the children that will only ever get to read those books by checking them out of a library and never owning one for themselves – will no longer be able to do that because we are not generous enough to keep the libraries open - - - well, something about that stinks. When I think about the fact that more

teachers are going to be cut and class sizes will grow larger, and while I believe because of who we are our children will not really be affected by this, but at risk schools will begin an escalated spiral downward - - - well, something about that stinks. And in addition to teachers, special programs and sports will be cut – now it won't hurt my boys because we can afford to pay the high cost of area leagues while for many, free school sports is their only ticket to affordable higher education – well, something about that stinks. Don't worry, I'll not even attempt a word about Healthcare Reform – except to say that anything short of lavish and extravagant Generosity would be shameful. Surely there are enough people in this town and in this nation with expensive jars of perfume that they could sell and give to the schools and to the libraries and to the hungry and homeless and uninsured of our city and our nation. Surely some of us have some perfume we've been holding back and saving for a special occasion. I say that Park Road Baptist Church should host a "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow" party just like Mary and Martha did that day. And we need to, each one, gather our most valuable treasure and break it open and pour it and spread it and give it away. And we need to do it in way that will make some people say to themselves – that's almost wasteful. And we need to do it with joy and thanksgiving and in a spirit of lavish generosity. Surely we could make this a sweet-smelling city with the Smell of Generosity. Surely we could fill our church with fragrance of giving – lavish, extravagant, let our hair down, foot massaging Generosity. We can do just that in a few moments at the Youth Bake Sale and Auction – sending our youth on a mission trip that might just change their lives. Really change their lives. I've seen it happen before – I've even experienced myself. We do that every time we put money in that offering plate that will pass down the pew in just a few moments. We can do it with our money and with our possessions and with our very lives.

Is there anything that smells better than what I smelled Friday late afternoon? The first grass-cutting of the spring. Is there anything that smells better than neighborhood grills getting fired up for a first of the season cookout? Is there anything that smells better than flowers beginning their bloom? Yep. It's the Smell of Generosity. Mary knew that smell, and so did Jesus. And when he said *when you do this unto the least of these my brothers and sisters, you have done it unto me* – I realized that my conundrum was solved. May it be so.