

# Pure Nard

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Six days before Passover, Jesus entered Bethany where Lazarus, so recently raised from the dead, was living. Lazarus and his sisters invited Jesus to dinner at their home. Martha served. Lazarus was one of those sitting at the table with them. Mary came in with a jar of very expensive aromatic oils, anointed and massaged Jesus' feet, and then wiped them with her hair. The fragrance of the oils filled the house. John 8:1-5

I'm not a good selector of perfumes or aftershaves or toilet water or heaven-forbid cologne. I'm forever shooting those sample bottles on pieces of paper or, if I think I'll like it over time, I'll shoot it on my wrist. But then I walk around the store and forget to return to the bottle of aftershave that I really liked and even if I do return, I can't remember which smell on which wrist belongs to which bottle on the shelf.

I should plan better. Maybe write the name of the perfume on my wrist with a ball-point pen after shooting it up with smellum.

A better plan is always to go through those fashion magazines and undoing the little flaps and wiping the aroma on my wrist and asking my wife to smell it to get her opinion. "Ooh, that's nice," she might say, and then I could stuff the piece of paper with the name of the perfume or cologne on it into a pocket and, if I remember where it is, I could take it to the store and buy a bottle.

Inevitably, of course, when I get there, I see that the bottle is \$10 an ounce and my mission is immediately aborted.

My best bet, I think, is just to had the piece of paper to my wife and say, "Get this."

"Please."

She has a better understanding about the cost of fine perfumes and could withstand the sticker shock better than I could.

The costly Nard in the story this morning weighed about a pound, it says. A weight of about 12 ounces according to the story. And it cost about 300 denarii. A Denarius was a day's wages for the average person, so, if an average person today makes about \$35,000 and you divide that up into day's wages of about \$134 per day times 300 days we get about \$40,000 worth of perfume, or over \$3,000 per ounce.

I did a quick scan of the Internet and the world's most expensive perfume is Clive Christian No. 1 Imperial Majesty Perfume – \$12,721.89 per ounce. Seems

that the container accounts for much of that price so, Clive Christian has come out with this perfume in a less expensive container for mere \$2,150 per oz. So now we're in the range of Mary's Pure Nard at \$3,000 per oz.

And the fragrance filled the whole room.

Well, I would guess it should.

The story of Mary of Bethany pouring expensive oils on Jesus' body is told in all four of the Gospels. Not many stories and parables and sayings of Jesus appear in all four Gospels. The parable of the Good Samaritan, for example, only appears in the Gospel of Luke. All the Gospel writers remember different stories about Jesus or stories that Jesus told and relatively few of them are repeated from one Gospel to another.

This is especially true of stories that appear in the Gospel of John, because John's Gospel is very different from the other three. It is significant then that this story of the extravagant gift of Mary in pouring these oils on Jesus' body would be remembered by all of the Gospel writers. There is something wonderful and beautiful about the story. And every Gospel writer reports that someone took offense at Mary's extravagance. A prodigious gift perhaps. Mary the prodigal giver.

In John's report, it is Judas who is offended. In Mark's Gospel it is reported that all the disciples joined in their offense. In Luke it is the Pharisees who were offended and in Matthew it is reported that the "bystanders" (whomever they were) were offended. Suffice it to say that it is an offensive thing for people as poor as those with whom Jesus' kept company to pour expensive oils on their guest.

Oils so pure, it is said, that it filled the entire room with its fragrance!

Some of that offense still existed in the 12<sup>th</sup> century in the person of St. Francis of Assisi whose whole life was about simple living and the rejection of his own wealthy state. One might hope that this aversion of extravagance may now be expressed in the papacy of Francis I who as bishop of Buenos Aires, rejected the bishop's palace and moved into an apartment. He had no drivers/no limosines but rather took public transportation to his offices and people along the way, knew when he would be on the train and would join him for a private/public audience while he rode to work.

Having said that and confessing my own admiration of the rejections of the wealth of the church, there is something beautiful about the extravagance of Mary's offering. It was not a papal mansion and it was not an expensive limousine. It was a momentary offering at the point of Jesus' last days.

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It is important here to note where John, the Gospel writer, places this story. Jesus' good friend, Lazarus, who had been dead for four days, has just been brought back to life. His sisters Mary and Martha were in the very midst of their grief. Friends were calling with their casserole dishes and pies and cookies, consoling the sisters. Jesus loved Lazarus deeply and, in the shortest verse in the Bible it says, "He wept."

Jesus approaches the tomb of his friend Lazarus and Lazarus' sister, Mary, warns him against going in there, for, as the King James Version puts it, "By now the body stinketh." After Jesus finishes praying for Lazarus, He calls out, "Lazarus come out" and, all bound in his burial cloths, he comes out and Jesus says, "Untie him and let him go."

Immediately following this story of the raising of Lazarus, we are told of the plot to assassinate Jesus. Because of this plot against him, Jesus stopped going around in public and hid among his friends until Passover.

And then, six days before Passover, we hear this extraordinary story of Mary, the sister of Lazarus, anointing Jesus with fine, rare and pure oils, oils that, if sold, would have rendered an extraordinary amount of money that could have fed the poor according to Judas' shallow challenge.

And therein lies part of the offense. The anointing of Jesus is an offense against practicality. But the offense is deeper, I think, for it is reported in all the Gospels. For it is, finally a story about our Lord, who is **caught receiving grace rather than dispensing it.**

He is caught receiving grace rather than dispensing it.

Pure Nard is given to Jesus in his last days, a mystery somehow revealed to Mary of Bethany.

Here, on the eve of his death at the hands of the political and religious authorities, Jesus is anointed for burial by the sister of the man he raised from the dead.

An interesting twist of events, if you ask me.

Jesus has given life to Mary's brother, perhaps at the cost of his own life. By anointing his feet with a costly ointment, Mary shows both that she appreciates the cost and that she is ready to offer something costly in return.

I noticed lately that there are fewer and fewer notices in the obituaries that donations should be given to such and such a charity, "in lieu of flowers." In other words, instead of giving flowers, give a donation to this or that charity. Flowers have been seen by some as such a senseless extravagance in the

face of death. But flowers really are an extraordinary gift, and I notice more and more, that the most beautiful spray of flowers are now placed on the casket and each member of the family who attends the gravesite, take home with them a flower from that spray, if they should choose to do so. Flowers are a senseless extravagance, but, O, so beautiful.

And, there are these days, fewer and fewer of such notices in the paper. I think that flowers are appropriate in such times as those. A wasteful, perhaps, but altogether beautiful extravagance, it seems to me. It is altogether appropriate that we have this morning on the altar, a beautiful display of flowers in loving memory of \_\_\_\_\_.

Still, flowers at a funeral don't even compare to the extravagance of the expensive oils that Mary bestowed on Jesus. And none of us would blame the disciples, or bystanders or Pharisees or even Judas for that matter, for raising an objection to Mary's extravagant expression of love.

But Jesus accepts Mary's offering and he rebuked his disciples by saying, "leave her alone. She kept this perfume for the day of my burial." And then, these difficult words, "You will always have the poor with you, but you won't always have me."

Some conservative politicians have used this remark of Jesus out of the context of Mary's abundant love to suggest that we can do nothing about poverty. That's furthest from the point of this story and a misuse of scripture for political ends. Jesus is saying simply, there will always be opportunity to give to the poor. There will not always be opportunities to attend to those you love who are close to their deaths. Pay attention to the things that are important.

More than that, for those of us who are so concerned about the poor and the caring for the poor, we shouldn't be so calculating in our offerings. And we should be even less calculating in our receiving the offerings of others. If Jesus is our model we should be willing to say that it is just as blessed to receive as to give. Here Jesus is caught receiving grace, and, like all the rest, we can't help but feel just a bit embarrassed by it. In a world where it is possible to give so graciously, perhaps the real lesson we all have to learn is how to receive graciously the warm and loving gifts of our friends, especially in our time of most compelling need.

Here we have a story of Jesus at his point of greatest vulnerability -- shown here as one vulnerable to Mary and her reckless act of gratitude and we are offended. "But if we are to allow our love and service to be defined and directed

by Jesus, then we must risk living with openness and vulnerability to the love of others-- as Jesus, himself lived.”

When my father died some few years ago, I received several wonderful flower arrangements. Cards might have been enough. The money spent on the flowers (which soon enough withered and died) could have just as well been given to Hebron House or Hope Center or the Women’s Center or the Food Pantry. But In my old age, I’ve grown to love flowers in a way I never did when I was younger, but finally, I need to admit publically, that I am a beggar and long for beauty in the way that Jesus did.

And I am more than thankful.