"Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary?" A sermon based on Philippians 3:4b-14; and John 12:1-8 delivered on April 6, 2025 by Rev. Alison Andrea Young at the First Congregational UCC of Onekama, Michigan.

(Our Theme throughout Lent will be the Lord’s Prayer. Today we explore the words: **“On earth as it is in heaven . . .”**)

One thing I used to say is: if I use an allusion to a nursery rhyme, a fable or a fairy tale in a sermon and no one in the congregation gets it . . .I should probably retire—Again. Hopefully, “Mary, Mary quite contrary, how does our garden grow? With silver bells and cockle shells and little maids all in a row” still strikes a note of recognition? (wait for it!)

So, when I point to this Mary who “took about a pintof pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus’ feet and wiped his feet with her hair.,” (v. 3) you will understand how contrary that would have been in that time and place. And add to that, that she was a woman intimately touching a man in public! Contrary, indeed! So, no wonder the gospel goes on to say, “But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, **‘**Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages.’” And how even more controversial it was when, Jesus admonishes him saying: “Leave her alone . . .It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.”!! (v. 7-8)

In Mary of Bethany's actions, here described, and in Jesus’ answer lie the core questions of earthly stewardship. What do we give to Christ and his church and what is our motive for giving? It is also a question of how what we do here on earth, is somehow reflective of heaven. What do we preserve for Christ and his church and what is our motive for preservation? But, before we get to that core question, we must be very cautious because, paradoxically, over the centuries, this passage has been used as the watchword for callousness—as a warrant to disregard the needs of the poor and allow the rich to keep and waste their “expensive perfume of pure nard." This is a perfect example of how a verse in the scriptural witness can be twisted and taken out of context.

In John, our most recent gospel writer, we have this blatant editorializing which is clearly aimed at nailing Judas as the betrayer and a thief. Notice the parenthetical statements John inserts in the traditional story of the woman with the ointment: Judas Iscariot (who was later to betray him) and later (He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.) John's editorializing is clearly aimed at portraying Judas as a scoundrel. With 20-20 hindsight, the writer of the Gospel of John is making sure that we know that Judas was the worst of all betrayers. This is true, even though there is absolutely no evidence (other than that provided here) that Judas ever stole from the common purse, or that his betrayal was anything more than the act of an impatient messianic zealot. Interpreters of this passage that use it against the poor totally forget that Jesus was again quoting from the Torah—from one of his favorite books—Deuteronomy—15:11 which says: "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the' poor and needy neighbor in your land.'"

Jesus, far from condoning callousness toward those in poverty was saying, by virtue of quoting from the Torah, that the people's obligation to feed and clothe the poor will always be our obligation--will always "be with us." This fact becomes even more clear when we read the parallel passages in the older Gospels. For instance, in Mark, our oldest Gospel, the same story of the woman; with the ointment in 14:6-9, ends with Jesus' admonishing not just Judas, but the whole company of disciples with the following, "But Jesus said, let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial. Truly I tell you, whenever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.” (NRSV)

So, the Gospel of John, in its context, among the other proclamations of the good news, as Mark puts it, and keeping in mind that Jesus was quoting from Deuteronomy—and that the Gospel of John's purpose here is to make sure that we know what a scoundrel Judas was—is still making a point about the core question of Stewardship. And so, we are left with the question, were Mary's actions (she is here identified, and in other places just called "a certain woman") faithful stewardship or not? What is Jesus’ reaction to the horror of the disciples at the so-called "waste" of the costly perfume really saying?

Were Mary's actions—"Quite Contrary"—so to speak—to the spirit of the Gospel—to feed and clothe the poor—or not? In other words, is an extravagant and costly show of love ever warranted? Well, I believe that the answer is an unequivocal "Yes," and I think we would be overlooking the import of Jesus' admonishment to the company of disciples and to his betrayer, if we do not answer "Yes"—because the key to the answer is not the surface of the act—that "expensive perfume" was "wasted' when it could have been sold to feed the poor—but the key to the answer is the deeper meaning of the act--the symbolic meaning of the act—not just what appears on the surface. The meaning of Mary’s action has to do with what was right for Jesus’ need at the time. It has everything to do, in short, with the context of the act.

As we have already discussed, Jesus had a need to be anointed, right then--a need to be among friends, right then—a need to find comfort among those who loved him, right then, on the road to Jerusalem and right before facing betrayal and an excruciating death on the cross. The point, then, is not one of waste—for is an act of love ever wasted? The point is that the woman—in buying the perfume and in anointing Jesus—an act which, of course, also symbolically prefigures Jesus' burial—is showing her Master--her Rabbi—her teacher—her Messiah—literally, her "anointed one," a most symbolically fitting and a most extravagant act of love. It is an act of love which is given “on earth as it would be in heaven!” Jesus, as a human being, needed this comfort here and now, not after his death.

The question posed here, then, is not whether Mary was contrary, but whether in being contrary, she is actually performing the act that is fitting in the context of the situation. The question is, then, as posed by this passage a very basic one. How do we show extravagant love to God and to Christ's church? Do we do this by keeping the coffers of our treasury full to preserve us against our fear of a day of—a day of—of what? Of possible discomfort? Of having to give up comforts at home to support our community of faith--our church home? Where is our faith in this? Do we keep working on a survival mode—a mode born out of fear—or do we show our extravagant love by having faith instead of fear. By having faith enough to give it away— to give our time, talents and our money extravagantly give it all away—extravagantly—to give everything that we have to show our love—in support of our local church—and in support of being extravagant partners with our sister churches in local, national, and global mission? We can start by giving generously to our local Food Pantry the offering which we which we are receiving again this morning.

When the Apostle Paul writes to the church he founded in Philippi he tells them that he will continue to “press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.. . . press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” He shows by this statement that the things he is seeking to do here on earth are the ones that he will eventually do in heaven in response to God’s call. He has just explained to them that any earthly gains he has made he “considers loss.” (v. 7) Like, Mary, he would give it all up to obtain the prize of “Becoming like Christ” in his death and attaining resurrection and eternal life in heaven. “On earth as it is in heaven” we say . . .

In our Ministerial Profile, the one that your search committee received about me when they were considering me to be your pastor, the UCC national church asks us pastors to share a passage or a quote from literature that means something special to us. This piece of a larger poem called Aurora Leigh, written by Elizabeth Barrett Browning in 1856, has always been my choice—it reads:

Earth’s crammed with heaven,

And every common bush afire with God;

But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,

The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries,

Earth is indeed “crammed with heaven” if we only have “eyes to see and ears to hear.” Paul knew that his “confidence in the flesh”—his earthly credentials—were nothing compared to a life lived “knowing Christ Jesus” as his Lord. Mary knew that the man, Jesus, soul-tired and footsore, needed human soothing and comfort in order to be fortified for the journey to Jerusalem and Golgotha. Both of them know, what Jesus knew when he taught us how to pray—that God’s kingdom and God’s will must be understood as being “on earth as it is in heaven.” Amen.

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