



# The Trinity Pulpit



## Recognizing Beauty

John 12:1-11

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Nadine Stair, an 85-year old facing death, once wrote these words:

If I had my life to live over ...  
I would take more chances, I would take more  
Trips, I would scale more mountains,  
I would swim more rivers, and I would  
Watch more sunsets. I would eat more  
Ice cream and fewer beans.  
I would have more actual troubles  
And fewer imaginary ones. You see ...  
I was one of those people who lived  
prophylactically and sensibly and sanely,  
Hour after hour and day after day ....  
... I've been  
One of those people who never went any-  
where without  
A thermometer, a hot water bottle, a gargle, a  
Raincoat and a parachute ....  
If I had it to do all over again,  
I'd travel lighter, much lighter,  
Than I have.  
I would start barefoot earlier  
In the spring, and I'd stay that way  
Later in the fall. And I would  
Ride more merry-go-rounds, and  
Catch more gold rings, and greet  
More people, and pick more flowers,  
And dance more often. If I had it  
To do all over again.  
But you see,  
I don't.<sup>1</sup>

We all have those “I wish I had” moments in life. As we look back on life there are moments that we would have acted differently or we would have paused in the moment longer or we would have savored the moment and reflected on it more, but we were too busy, too self absorbed and too blinded by the ordinary

to recognize the beauty of the moment we were experiencing.

That is our setting for our text today. In the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary, Jesus and his disciples have gathered for a meal. It is a meal that has been given in the honor of Jesus. This meal is occurring in a very important moment in Jesus' life. It is after the resurrection of Lazarus. Fresh on everyone's mind is the moment they saw Lazarus dead for three days come walking out of the tomb with his grave clothes bound around him. Jesus had come to raise his friend and return life to a family where there was death. He had come to bring comfort where there was grief and he had come to restore hope and faith when hope and faith had vanished. This time through Bethany, he was also coming on a matter of life and death – not Lazarus' but his own.

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem for the Passover Feast but this would be his last trip to Jerusalem and through Bethany. He had been trying to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must be betrayed and handed over to evil men, die, and then rise again, but they were not hearing him. They listened but did not understand, or they heard and did not listen.

Now, in this evening before his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, Jesus has paused to spend time with friends. I am sure that this meal in Jesus' honor was a way – even if a feeble way – to say “thank you” to Jesus for what he had done for this family. There, in the room, sat Lazarus whom Jesus had raised from the dead, as well as Jesus' disciples. Martha was doing what Martha did best and

that was serving the meal. She is the great hostess of the New Testament. Mary is also doing what she does best and that is giving her attention to Jesus. Mary, the one who would sit at Jesus' feet and just listen enters the room and this time she has something in her hand. It is a jar of perfume. It is described as a pint or about half a liter of pure nard. The pure nard would have probably been from an Indian Nard plant. Although not mentioned by John, the perfume was probably in an alabaster jar which was also of value. The jar would have a long neck and would require breaking to be used. The value of the perfume is estimated by Judas to be that of one year's wage. That would be over 300 denari. A denari was one day's wage. The actual value is hard to imagine but let me ask you what you would do with one year's salary. If you had one's year's salary what would that represent to you – comfort, security, the future? Yes, all of these things.

It might not be too much to say that this was Mary's most important possession. Some scholars have suggested that it was her dowry. As a woman of marrying age, she would have had a dowry and this very perfume may have been the very thing she was saving for her time of marriage.

What we can know for sure is that Jesus has come to her house again and is on his way to Jerusalem; Mary takes that which is the most valuable item she had and she pours it out on Jesus' feet. Then she wipes his feet with her hair and we are told that the whole house had the fragrance of this perfume. Mary had recognized the significance of this moment. She would not wait to act. She would not let Jesus come and go again without him knowing of her love and gratitude. So she acted. In a moment that seemed routine to others she recognized beauty and acted.

Not everyone recognized the moment like Mary. In fact, when Mary acted, Judas acted as well. Judas protested. Judas' comment is "What a waste. What a waste to pour out this perfume on the ground at Jesus' feet. This perfume could have gone to better use. It could have been sold and the money given to the poor." John tells us as an aside that Judas really did not want the money to go to the poor, but as the treasurer, he wanted the money for himself. Judas did not recognize the moment

because he was self absorbed and selfish.

Yet, Jesus knew the beauty of the moment. He tells Judas to leave Mary alone because what she has done was intended for him. He announces that Mary has anointed him for his death and burial. "The poor you will always have but you will not always have me." Now, let's not read into that verse more than Jesus intended. Jesus is not telling us not to care for the poor. Jesus is not saying we should be satisfied that people in this world are hungry, without shelter and opportunity. Jesus is making another point: there are moments which come in our lives that do not come again and we must recognize them and respond within them. We must learn to see the beauty of the moment.

What can we do to learn to recognize the beauty of the moment and not have our lives filled with "I wish I had" moments? First, we can have a new perspective. Mary had a different perspective than the others that night. Some were just there for the dinner. It was just another night. They were blinded to the beauty of the moment by the routine. It is true that the routine can rock us asleep to the beauty that surrounds us. We can take our jobs for granted because it is the same, day in and day out. We can take our spouse and children for granted because we are lost in the routine. We can take our church for granted because all we think of at church is the next meeting, responsibility and our routine. We can take others for granted because we see them everyday and they do not appear to be special. We can miss the beauty of the moment because of routine.

There were those who were there that night who were selfish. Being self absorbed can cause us to miss the beauty of the moment. Judas is the person who speaks up, but I sometimes wonder if he speaks for others that night. Does Judas just say what everyone else is thinking? He says "This is a waste. There are better things to do with the resource." Judas is the one who is always looking to find the wrong in any situation and because he does, he misses the significance of the situation.

He is like the man who was so self-absorbed in his generosity that he went by a pretzel vendor everyday and, feeling sorry for the pretzel vendor, he laid two dollars on the counter but did not take a

pretzel. He would never take a pretzel but would rather leave his money there as a gift for another. The man would walk away proud every day for his good deed. Then, one day the vendor said to him "I need to say something to you." The man interrupted him and said "Oh, I know what you are going to say. You want to know why I put down two dollars everyday but do not take a pretzel, don't you?" The vendor replied "No, I want to tell you that the pretzels have gone up to \$2.50!" Sometimes we are so self absorbed even in our own good intentions that we miss the beauty of a moment.

Not Mary, she was fully present in this moment. I think that is what we must learn from Mary. We must learn to be fully present to God in the moments of the day. Let us not forget that this is the same Mary who sat at Jesus' feet to listen to his teaching and would not be deterred from Jesus' presence by the demands of the urgency of the household like Martha was deterred. She had developed the ability to truly be present to Jesus any time he came to her home. I sometimes wonder if she was the only one that had heard him. Could it be while Jesus told the 12 over and over again about God's plan for his crucifixion and resurrection that Mary was the only one who heard it when he said it? Could it be this attentive one was the one who had finally heard the gospel plan? If so, then her only response was the right response, and that was an act of total gratitude and love. That is what she did, I think because she was the one who was present to Jesus in the moment.

How can we be present to Jesus so that we, too, might see the beauty of God's presence in the moment? Well, as odd as it sounds, the routine of discipleship keeps us from being blinded by the routine of the day. Let me explain. The daily routine of reading the Bible and spending time with prayer prepares our minds for the day. It helps us have a new perspective as we go through the day. It helps us to see others as Christ sees them and it helps us respond in situations as Christ would respond. It helps us discover what Paul describes as the mind of Christ. That is, we think like Jesus so that in any given moment we might not miss the beauty of God's presence. Paul would describe it as "pray continually." Paul is indicating a lifestyle that seeks to please God and seeks to dis-

cover God's presence in any moment.

Discipleship means living one day at a time as though Jesus were near: near in time, near in place, the witness of our motives, our speech, and our behavior. As indeed he is.<sup>2</sup>

Mary also might be described as a person who loved too much. I say that as a compliment. She is someone whose love had to be expressed. It was not enough for her to hope that Jesus knew of her love for him. It was not enough for her to simply sit quietly next to him. She loved too much and she had to express it.

I think of the times we let pass by and think to ourselves "Surely, they know how much I care for them or how much I appreciate what they have done for me." Yet, there are some conversations that need to take place. There are some expressions of love that need to occur. It is not enough to hope they know, not at least when it comes to someone who really loves.

One day a certain father went to visit his son's preschool. It was a day when dads could come to visit. But when he got there, he was shocked to discover that only a handful of fathers had come to be with their children.

Later on that morning, all the children were sitting on the floor in a circle. The teacher asked the children to tell the group something about their fathers, something that was special. One little boy said, "Well, my daddy is a lawyer. He makes a lot of money and we live in a big house." Another child said, "My father is very smart. He teaches at the college and a lot of important people know him." Finally it was time for this father's son to say something special about his dad. The little boy looked up at his father, then he looked around the circle of his friends, and then he just smiled and proudly said, "My dad ... my dad is here!"

Do you imagine the other dads would have said they did not love their children? Of course they did. But you see, when we love too much, that is really love then we are compelled to acts of love and gratitude.

Mary was a woman who had a God perspective on life and she also was one who loved too much that

caused her to act. She also was one who grasped the opportunity. We must take the risks of love. We must speak words of love to those we love. We must speak words of encouragement and hope to those who feel hopeless. We must act when no one else is willing to act in a way that is loving and Christlike. We must take the risk to be Christ wherever we find ourselves each day. We must not miss the beauty of the moment.

There were two ways of looking at this moment in Lazarus' home. One was to see it as a waste and the other was to see it as a beautiful moment of love. I think this moment is important because if we can begin to see this moment correctly, then maybe we can see other moments correctly as well. Think about how this effects the moments that follow in Jesus' life. How will we look at the cross? Was it a waste? It looks that way at first, but when we see it from God's perspective, then the old rugged cross with its shame, pain, grief, forsakenness and tragedy becomes something of immeasurable beauty.

How do we look at others' lives that have lost their way? Do we say "What a waste," or do we say, even though their lives are filled with sin and trouble, when we see them through God's perspective, then their lives are beautiful to God?

Even our own lives become something beautiful. For God sees us through the eyes of love. God does not see all of our filth, sin, shortcomings and failure but through Jesus God sees us as those he cherishes and loves. So, God took the moment of opportunity in the cross to transform our lives into something beautiful. It could be said that God loved you and me too much not to act.

Tony Campolo tells of a poll that asked people over 95 what they would do differently. Their answers were "risk more, reflect more and do more things that would last" after they were gone. That is really what Mary did. She risked an act of love. She reflected on the moment and would not let it pass by. She acted in a way to leave a legacy of love.

It is said that the power of smell may actually be our most powerful sense. A smell can cause you to have a sense of peace, or fear and even cause nightmares. Just the smell of certain foods can transport you to a time when you were a child and you felt secure and cared for. Just the smell of a classroom can transport you to your own school experiences. Smell is powerful.

It is said that this perfume lasted beyond the initial act. It filled the room. Its purpose was for Jesus' death and burial. Some scholars have imagined that this perfume would have lasted longer than the day. The kind of perfume and the amount may have lingered in the house and in Jesus' clothing for days. It could be that even after a week of walking, teaching, betrayal and the horror of the cross that the smell lingered. It lasted beyond the moment and even now we speak of this act of love.

The apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians about his ministry that they were the fragrance of Christ. They were the aroma of Christ to everyone everywhere. To those who were being saved, they were the aroma of life and to those who were rejecting Christ they were the stench of death. In both cases Paul says that we are the aroma of Christ.

When you and I choose to recognize the beauty of God' presence everyday then something wonderful happens. We seize the moment and recognize the presence of God. We love too much and must react in love toward others. We become the fragrance of Christ for all to experience, and in doing so, the moments of our lives become like the moment in Lazarus' home that night. It becomes a moment of beauty that fills the room and lasts. Don't go through life without recognizing the beauty of the presence of God. ♦

<sup>1</sup>Bernie Siegel. *Peace, Love and Healing: Bodymind Communication and the Path to Self-Healing* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 245-46.

<sup>2</sup>Brennan Manning. *The Signature of Jesus* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1992), 66.

