

Judas Days, Mary Moments
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Psalm 126

- ¹ When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
² Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
“The LORD has done great things for them.”
³ The LORD has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.
⁴ Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.
⁵ May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.
⁶ Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.

John 12:1-8

¹Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ²There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” ⁶(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) ⁷Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

This gospel lesson for today seems to be about Mary and Judas as much as, if not more than, about Jesus. Before we talk about today's lesson, as any good seminarian knows, we should look at what comes before and after today's text. The preceding chapter of John tells the story of the death and resurrection of Lazarus, who we hear of again today. We also learn about Martha and Mary in this eleventh chapter. Mary, in particular, is mentioned in a way that is strange to our modern ears in a literary sense, and maybe even to the original hearers. Before we even learn about this dinner given for Jesus, John tells us, “Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill.” Clearly this happening was so important to John that one telling was not

deemed sufficient. After the resurrection of Lazarus and before our text, the chief priests and Pharisees began looking for a time when they could put Jesus to death.

What follows after the dinner is a bookend to the plot of the chief priests and Pharisees for they decide that not only must Jesus die but also Lazarus for being a part of Jesus' notoriety. John tells us of this plan of theirs and then brings us to what we consider the start of Holy Week and the procession with palms. Both the resurrection of Lazarus and Jesus' procession on the donkey are significant stories in our understanding of the life of Jesus. So why does today's text barely mention him but instead focuses on Mary and Judas?

While not generally rich in character development, John's gospel does give us a bit more insight into both Mary and Judas than he does for others within the gospel. Yet, we still seem to walk away with one-dimensional understandings of them both. Judas is the one who betrays Jesus, leading to his death, and Mary is the one who anoints Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair. This week I kept thinking that I should re-watch John Hughes' *The Breakfast Club* and I immediately realized why. For those of you who haven't seen it, five North Shore kids are in Saturday detention for a variety of reasons. While there, the principal gives them the assignment to write an essay on who they think they are. In the end, one kid writes the essay from them all and we hear it read at the beginning of the movie. It says, "You see us as you want to see us, in the simplest terms, in the most convenient definitions. You see us as a brain, athlete, basket case, princess, criminal." At the end of the movie we hear a slightly different version which tells us that *each* of them is a brain, athlete, basket case, princess, and criminal. Just as there is more to each of these kids than the labels put upon them by administrators and peers, there is more to the stories of Mary and Judas.

Looking at Judas so simply and linking him only to a bad thing is like remembering Steve Bartman only as that guy who touched the Cubs baseball – you know the one, during the playoffs in 2003. But I do Mr. Bartman a disservice even by bringing him up in this way. I'm certain there's so much more to him as a person than this one event so I want to acknowledge that first. And, just as there is more to Steve Bartman, there is assuredly more to Judas. In other areas of the gospel, while we may not get a thorough multi-dimensional view of who Judas was, we do get clues that there is more to him. I'll come back to those clues in just a minute but I want to address something about this text, and this gospel, that has always been difficult for me, and I'm guessing it may trouble some of you as well. Before we can know who Judas is, we should know who Judas is not.

John tells us earlier in the gospel that Jesus knew he would be betrayed and told the gathered twelve, "Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil." The gospel continues, "He was speaking of Judas son of Simon Iscariot, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray him."

Later in the gospel we read that “the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray [Jesus].” The other gospels don’t paint Judas to be quite so diabolical. Matthew nor Mark ever mention Judas being possessed; Luke says only that “Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot” before he went to the chief priests. Between Luke and John, Judas can appear to be at the mercy of the devil.

Craig Koester, in his book on symbolism in the gospel of John¹, explains it like this. Judas is first an individual human being, named as the son of Simon Iscariot. Next, he also represents the unbelief of a number of disciples. In the sixth chapter of John, after Jesus explains that he is the bread of life, we read that some disciples found his teachings too difficult to understand and believe so they “turned back and no longer went about with him.” Just four verses later, Jesus talks about Judas as the devil who will betray him. It isn’t a stretch to think that Judas was among those who found Jesus’ teachings too hard to understand, to believe, to swallow. And on a third level, Judas is an “agent of the powers of evil.”²

Koester asks the question this way, “Given Judas’ alliance with evil, we might ask whether Judas is accountable for his actions or whether he is a hapless agent of Satan.” His answer is this: “Judas is both... Whether engaging in petty theft or carrying out the devil’s desire for betrayal, Judas remains culpable.”³ Koester goes on to ask another weighty question – if Jesus knew what Judas was going to do and Judas’ actions “contributed to God’s plans for salvation,” does this “suggest that God predestined Judas to betray Jesus,” making Judas not accountable for his actions “since he had no choice in the matter”?⁴ The answer is no. He says, “God did not cause the evil of betrayal but turned it in a direction that ultimately served his saving purposes.”⁵ We all struggle with our own demons yet, in the end, we are still responsible for the choices we make.

So where does this leave us with Judas, the one we remember for betraying Christ and bringing about his death? Although an unbeliever, he remained a follower, at least in the literal sense. Maybe he figured following Christ would be more glamorous, would get him in with the upper echelon, and instead, he found himself surrounded by the lowest of the low. In today’s reading we learn that Judas stole from the common purse. Maybe he decided it was stupid to have given up his source of income and all his earthly possessions to follow Christ, and the money from the common purse seemed a consolation for having thrown his life away. Maybe he just had a hard time understanding the metaphors, got tired of the riddles, and believed those who claimed to comprehend to be liars in order to

¹ Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: meaning, mystery, community*, pp. 73-75.

² Ibid, p. 75.

³ Ibid, p. 75.

⁴ Ibid, p. 75.

⁵ Ibid, p. 75.

make himself feel better about his own lack of comprehension. Judas is the “before” scenario in Psalm 126. After the people of Israel had their fortunes restored, they “were like those who dream.” Those who do not dream are those who have given up on dreams, given up on hope. Judas could not accept the hope in Jesus’ Word.

Perhaps he saw turning Christ over to the chief priests as his chance to break free from what no longer made sense to him. If the chief priests made Jesus stop preaching, and it didn’t get out that he was to blame, then Judas could stop following him and go back home still looking like a good guy whose mission was cut short by the authorities. Perhaps it never occurred to him that his actions would lead to Christ’s death. Who here has *not* made a decision that had very different outcomes than anticipated? Have you ever thought you knew what you were getting into with a new job only to find it wasn’t what you expected or hoped for? Have you ever felt justified in making a bad choice because you had been the victim of someone else’s bad choice? If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, you might know Judas better than you thought.

What about Mary? She’s a good person – do we really need to know more about her? For us to really “get” what it is that makes her good, yes, we do. Before anything we must recognize that Mary, unlike Judas, believed. We know this, for when she first sees Jesus after her brother Lazarus dies, she says, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” If you had been here, Lazarus would not have died. What a strong testament to her faith in who Jesus was. She continues by saying, “But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” Mary is convinced. Even though the situation didn’t end up the way she desperately hoped, she still believed that in Christ all things are possible.

While not all four gospels credit Mary as the woman in this story, what they hold in common is that there is a woman who anoints Jesus with costly perfumed ointment and he is moved by her kindness. For the writer of John, this woman is Mary and her actions are nothing if not impulsive in the truest sense, following her impulses regardless of what others might think or say. Imagine, Jesus sits at Mary’s family table, talking, teaching. As Mary sits in his presence, she can’t help but think of the events of the recent weeks. Lazarus was so, so ill and they had sent word to Jesus to come and help him. He was nearby and could surely make it before Lazarus took a horrible turn for the worse. But he didn’t come, at least not on time. Her brother died. When Jesus did finally arrive, she cried before Jesus, tears of grief, tears of anger, as she had been doing each of the four days since Lazarus’ death. Seeing her pain and her sorrow, Jesus wept, too. And then something happened that Mary never could have imagined. Jesus gave life back to Lazarus. It wasn’t a dream – there Lazarus was, sitting at the table with Jesus.

Her heart was so full – full of joy that Lazarus was alive, full of thanks for what Jesus had done, full of awe that she was sitting in the presence of the Master, the one above all for whom God would do what he asked. Moved by such intense adoration for this man, this man who she understood was not like other men, she rushed from the room to the place where she had stored the nard, brought thousands of miles from the Himalayas to Bethany, pure, the good stuff and not an imitation. Fighting the urge to run back into the room and make a scene, she quietly came to sit at the feet of Christ, where she began to dip into the jar, taking the ointment and rubbing it into his feet, until the jar was empty. Touching him was already breaking convention for she did not belong to this man; she wouldn't dare to touch his head.

Yet what could she wipe his feet with? In her haste, she had not also collected a cloth. To leave him covered in ointment would be awkward at best but, more importantly, would break her attention to him, something she didn't wish to do. She would not disrobe so she takes what she has, her hair, and she begins to wipe the excess from each foot until her hair is heavy with the perfume, heavy with a reminder of her thankfulness for Christ in her life.

In each gospel, the woman's actions of anointing Jesus with copious amounts of expensive perfume are considered wasteful by someone present. We could even say her action was irresponsible for such a perfume was worth a year's salary for a laborer and here she spilled it all over Jesus' feet, not even his head. And then to go and wipe his feet with her hair! If someone were to make such an impulsive, illogical decision today, we might say they were immature and chide them for not planning ahead or thinking through what it would be like to carry around a head of hair full of ointment in a time when there was no quick way to remove it.

As we get older, our goal is to learn to control our impulses and think through our actions. And yet, if we associate impulsiveness with childishness, aren't we called to remember what Jesus tells us about children? "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." If Judas is the "before" in Psalm 126, then Mary is the "after," for honoring Jesus in this way, with abandon, following her impulse, being fully in the moment, is like exclaiming in laughter and shouts of joy. Remember back to a time when you spent your money on something that had no purpose – your parents asked you, "but what are you going to *do* with it?" Think about being somewhere you didn't want to leave, about doing something you didn't want to end. Were you ever the child who cried because it was time to go from the park or a friend's house or a family gathering or a party? Can you feel again that aching to be in the presence of something so good? Do you remember making excuses to make the time last a little bit longer – let me draw just one more picture, let me ride one more ride, I want one more cupcake, we're still playing. Then maybe you know Mary better than you thought.

So why do I tell you about who Judas and Mary were? If you are able to take part in the Pilgrimage in Faithfulness class being offered in April and May, and I hope you are, you will meet my homiletics, or preaching, professor, Fred Holper. He told us, in writing any sermon, we must figure out from the text what the good news is for each of us. How do the lives of Mary and Judas offer us any good news? Theologian George W. Stroup suggests that the reader of this gospel should not be choosing sides with Judas or Mary because the reader is both Judas and Mary.⁶ We can relate to both Judas and Mary. The good news is this: sometimes we have our Mary moments, times when we are willing to sacrifice our goods of earthly value, times when we are intently active, intensely present in our Christian lives, times when God leaves us full of awe and empty of our inhibitions. And then, sometimes, outweighing the Mary moments, we have our Judas days, days when it feels just too hard to follow Jesus, when the sacrifices don't seem worth the cost, when we struggle to believe that the gospel is good news for us, when we choose our interests over the "right thing," when we just don't feel like being nice, when we'd rather coast on the grace of being forgiven. Just as with Judas, we are accountable for our actions, for our choices. We have a place in Psalm 126, too. In our Judas days, we may go out weeping but we still bear the seed for sowing. If we let ourselves follow our impulses to let go to Christ like Mary, **we** shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying sheaves of a blossoming spirituality. It's up to you – do you choose to focus on how your relationship with Jesus weighs you down or do you choose to discover, and rediscover, the awe in your relationship with Jesus?

⁶ George W. Stroup, *Feasting on the Word: Fifth Sunday in Lent*, p. 144.