

## Philippians 3:4b-14

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup>circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup>as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

<sup>7</sup> Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. <sup>8</sup> More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, <sup>\*</sup> the righteousness from God based on faith. <sup>10</sup> I want to know Christ <sup>\*</sup> and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup> if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

<sup>12</sup> Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; <sup>\*</sup> but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. <sup>13</sup> Beloved, <sup>\*</sup> I do not consider that I have made it my own; <sup>\*</sup> but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, <sup>14</sup> I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly <sup>\*</sup> call of God in Christ Jesus.

## John 12:1-11

<sup>1</sup> Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup> There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. <sup>3</sup> Mary 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.

<sup>4</sup> But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup> 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' <sup>6</sup> (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.) <sup>7</sup> Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup> You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

<sup>9</sup> When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>10</sup> So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, <sup>11</sup> since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

## Taking It Personally

I want you to close your eyes and take in the scene. Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus, anointing Jesus' feet with perfume, and wiping them with her hair in a very shocking and unusual display of devotion and, quite frankly love! Today I would like us to go deeper and explore the love between Jesus and Mary, to see it as something quite personal, and I will emphasize how important it is to us to develop that same kind of relationship with Jesus here

and now. Through this I would simply pray that we internalize our experience of his love so that we might offer Jesus the same sort of reckless abandon in our relationship that Mary offers.

Let's explore the relationship between Mary and Jesus:

First of all, scripture doesn't go into much detail when it comes to personal relationships with people; there are the disciples, but many are just mentioned by name, and there's no recorded dialogue between them and Jesus, and most of the dialogue concerns instructions on how to be good disciples. So it's nice to learn that Mary and Martha and Lazarus, these three siblings living together in Bethany, are described as Jesus' friends, and very special friends; Martha sends word to Jesus that the one he loves is sick, and Jesus knows exactly who she's talking about: Lazarus. And of these three, Lazarus, Martha, and Mary, it's Mary who has the greatest affect upon Jesus (more on that later).

Luke's Gospel mentions Mary as one who is so mesmerized by Jesus' teaching that her sister Martha complains that she should be helping her in the kitchen, and there Jesus came to Mary's defense, telling Martha that Mary has made the right choice. Jesus does the same thing here in John's gospel, this time lighting into Judas in a much harsher way than he criticized Martha. Jesus says, "Leave her alone!" It's significant that Jesus comes to Mary's defense against what seem to be legitimate charges against her, because Jesus knows that Mary is led by the best of intentions. She's not being lazy by not helping her sister; she is absorbed in learning from a great teacher. She's not ignoring the needs of the poor when she pours the perfume on Jesus' feet; she is expressing her deep love for a great friend and teacher.

We learn more about the relationship with Mary and Jesus when we look at the story of the resurrection of Lazarus; Jesus arrives four days after Lazarus has died, and even though Jesus might have intended to raise Lazarus all along, something striking happens when Mary, eyes full of tears, says to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." And those words and those tears caused Jesus quite a stir; scripture says Jesus "was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved," and that Jesus wept. It was Mary that brought Jesus to tears. We often speak so generally about Jesus' love, but here we see how one woman affects Jesus as he most certainly affected her.

Now in order to gain a deeper understanding of today's text, we have to review what has been going on before Mary anoints his feet; what was going on around them? When Jesus raised up Lazarus, Mary was smart enough to see the trouble it would cause. Even before the miracle, Jesus was a wanted man in Jerusalem, considered a blasphemer by the Temple authorities. But with Lazarus' resurrection, things got exponentially worse; Jesus had just progressed from annoying to dangerous in the eyes of the Temple authorities because now with the raising of Lazarus he was more popular than ever before, and with popularity comes many followers, and with many followers comes a threat to the status quo, creating a dangerous situation in regards to their Roman overlords. Rome would not tolerate anything that resembled a popular uprising; they would brutalize and terrorize the population if anyone got out of hand, and so the Temple leaders made plans to kill Jesus.

Jesus therefore left Lazarus' home, which is only three miles or so from Jerusalem, and instead went out into the wilderness to a place called Ephraim. And this is where we start to put the pieces together; something brought Jesus out of the wilderness and back to Bethany, so close to danger. Why would he leave the safety of Ephraim and enter Judea where people were looking to arrest him? The clue is in the last three verses of the Gospel lesson. The Jews are out to kill not only Jesus but Lazarus as well, because Lazarus is the evidence for Jesus' miracle which is part of what makes Jesus so popular.

And this explains why Jesus leaves the safety of the wilderness and comes not only to his friends' home in Bethany, but on the next day he plans to go to Jerusalem, to face his enemies and offer up his life. And here I want you to absorb this; Jesus not just making some generalized atonement for all the sins of humanity, though that is certainly part of what he is doing. I want you understand that this is indeed personal, especially when it comes to Lazarus and Martha and Mary. Jesus is giving his life for them! Because now Jesus is not the only one who is being threatened; Lazarus is at risk as well. And if the authorities send someone to kill Lazarus, there is a good chance that Mary and Martha will attempt to intervene and there is likely to be "collateral damage." Jesus, therefore, comes to Bethany, but only as he is on his way to Jerusalem. You might remember that when Jesus received news of Lazarus' illness, he did not immediately go to him but waited two days in order that "the Son of God may be glorified through it." The resurrection of Lazarus was the last of Jesus' 'signs' in John's Gospel, and Jesus knows that his end is near, but he does not want Lazarus or Martha or Mary to die with him.

I think Mary understood this; there was no chance he would survive the wrath of his enemies in Jerusalem. And so Mary, this young woman who so loved her teacher and Lord, who now sees her beloved preparing to die, finds the nicest gift she can find and gives it as well as her heart and soul to Jesus. She is doing exactly what Jesus tells Judas she's doing; she is preparing his body for death knowing that once he enters Jerusalem she will likely never see him again.

And she gives with reckless abandon. Women don't just walk in a room and pour perfume on someone's feet. Women don't remove their head scarf to expose their tresses, and they certainly don't use their tresses to wash and dry a man's perfume-soaked feet. These days it would just seem odd; back then it was beyond shocking.

We don't usually think of the Gospels, or of Jesus, as being romantic, but he was fully human, and he knew how Mary must have felt as well. When people we love die, or seem to be marching off to certain death, we break down. We mourn.

I pray that we could truly mourn Jesus in this season of Lent. We have the hindsight of the Resurrection, but I pray we don't move there too quickly lest we diminish the cost of our salvation and see the whole process as merely mechanical. Jesus died because he loves us, the way he loved Lazarus, the way he loved Martha, the way he loved Mary. Could our hearts be so moved that we too would give our all to Jesus in love and thanksgiving?

And can we appreciate that Jesus didn't just die for us as individuals but he died for the people around us, our brothers, our sisters. God's love for us is so much greater than our love for him, because his love is for everyone while our love tends to be restricted to those who think most like us, who look most like us, who believe most like us. God's love has no such limits, and if we intend to be good disciples we must appreciate this lest our evangelism be conducted be misguided or bigoted. Jesus died for everyone, so we have reason to love everyone as Jesus does.

Once we can truly mourn Jesus' death with the same intensity that Mary mourns it even while he's alive we can celebrate Easter for all that it truly means. Christ's resurrection means our resurrection, our eternal life in him that begins the moment we offer our lives to him. There is no greater news that we can imagine, but how do we show our appreciation? How do we show our love? Jesus would say we must love one another, and that includes 'the least of these,' whoever those people are to you. May we take Jesus personally. May we grasp the point that he gave his life for each of us and all of us, for our salvation and the salvation of the world.