

October 14, 2018  
John 12:1-8  
“Giving as Preparation of the Body”  
Michael Stanfield

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.” *The words of God for the People of God. Let us pray. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, Our rock and our redeemer, Amen.*

As a church, called to be disciples in the world, on which activity should we place our emphasis? The more *religious* act of gathering for worship or the more *socio-political* act of going out and taking care of the poor and disenfranchised?

That seems to be the question at the heart of our text today.

The eleventh chapter of John’s gospel concludes with outright plotting to arrest and kill Jesus; the twelfth chapter – today’s text – opens with, what at first appears to be, a scene of great serenity. The sisters Martha and Mary, with their recently-revived brother Lazarus, host Jesus and his disciples for supper. As a respite from the threats against his life, Jesus decides to spend a quiet moment with some of his closest friends.

But the quiet doesn’t last long. Not long after Jesus enters, Mary takes out a jar of nard and pours all of it onto Jesus in one extravagant act of love and worship. John goes into great detail about this act of anointing, including the comment about how the whole house was filled with the ointment’s fragrance. Suddenly, the evening’s events are moved beyond mere collegiality and congeniality. Nard was a rare and expensive perfume. And a whole jar of it cost three hundred denarii which was the equivalent of a year’s wages.

Now, *that* is an act of welcome!

But of course, it is more than that. Authorities are plotting Jesus’ demise. Mary knows it. So, to her, this is no casual gathering. It is an opportunity – perhaps one of the last she will have to worship her Lord before his betrayal. It is worthy to give to causes of poverty, relief of suffering, justice – that is what Mary was called by Jesus to do. But now is not the time for that. Now is the time for worship.

So, is Mary’s act solely a religious act or are there political undertones?

The Latin word *religio* from which our word, “religion” comes means literally to “reconnect”. Thus that is the primary role of religion and spirituality – reconnection when things have come apart – the bringing together of disparate parts and holding them together in a sacred act, or set of sacred acts.

The Greek word *polis*—from which our word “politics” derives—simply means “city” or “public forum”, where people gather together in peace. Thus the original goal of both religion and politics, in their purest forms interestingly, were quite similar: Reconnecting; coming together. Yet today, not less than in the time of Jesus, they are antagonistic.

To be a faithful disciple is to connect the inner world of *religio* with the outer world of the *polis*.  
From Richard Rohr; Connecting Inner and Outer Worlds; Sunday, July 8, 2018; Adapted from Richard Rohr, “Introduction,” “Politics and Religion,” *Oneing*, vol. 5 no. 2 (Center for Action and Contemplation: 2017), 11-12.

And that is exactly what Mary does in our morning text. It is a matter of timing – really. There is a time and place to stand up on the side of justice for the poor and oppressed. But there is also a time and place to stand in worship as preparation for possible sacrificial acts. In fact, the two acts are not opposed but rather, are complimentary.

During the unrest of the 1960’s, the civil rights movement at its core was a religious movement. Protests were preceded by worship and prayer because it was understood by activists that injury or even death was a possible outcome, even though the protests were going to be peaceful.

Mary’s act of anointing is received by Jesus not just as a religious act of passionate hospitality to an honored guest, but a politically subversive act, one of worshipping Jesus as the suffering messiah on his way to the cross.

When Mary pours that expensive perfume over Jesus’ head, Judas is indignant; “Why didn’t we sell that and give it to the poor?” He demands to know. But the problem is that Judas is less of a disciple than he is a corrupt politician. And what is that drives all corrupt politicians? The love of money. Judas was in charge of the disciple’s till and John lets us know that he was not above palming a few extra bucks for himself on the side.

And perhaps Judas, above all the other disciples except Mary, saw the proverbial handwriting on the wall. The Pharisees were circling the wagons on Jesus and here they were, thought Judas, wasting time and money – a year’s worth of wages for a few moments of worshipping and honoring Jesus when that money could be used for other things – especially to line Judas’ pockets.

Church members also get a little anxious from time to time over elders on the session who, in their opinion, are spending too much money on things that seem extravagant.

“Why,” they may ask, “aren’t we saving for times down the road when things might not be so rosy?” or “Why aren’t we giving more to missions for the poor and disenfranchised?”

Unlike with Judas, on the lips of faithful members, these are not cynical questions; they are good legitimate ones. Yet today’s text challenges such practical considerations no matter where they

come from. For in it, Jesus praises Mary for her extravagant act of devotion – her willingness to give her most precious possession for one moment of devoted worship to her Lord. So, was this really the responsible thing to do?

Absolutely. What was it Jesus said? Where your treasure is there will your heart be also?

What it really comes down to is this: where we put our money speaks about what we value. Mary valued the flesh and blood presence of Jesus which she, evidently better than anyone else, understood as more precious than anything. She recognized the fragility of that connection given the grave threats from the Pharisees and she seized the moment, honoring it with all she had, savoring it, and inviting others in a profound way to savor it with her...

Face to face, soul to soul connections were what Jesus was all about. They were at the heart of all his cries for justice. They, more than anything, hold out the possibility of really transforming the world.

So whenever I see money spent on missions for the poor pitted against money spent on sitting at the feet of Jesus together in worship, it makes me sad. I am drawn to the lesson of Mary's encounter with Jesus. Yes, we need to be political. We need to stand up for the poor. Yes we need to pledge our resources to issues of justice and peace. But the greatest act of justice in an unjust world always begins with the religious – with worship.

Building an inclusive worshipping community that attempts to do what our government and culture *will not* *is* these days perhaps the most radical act of peace and justice possible. We need to do everything we can politically to relieve the poor and those who are suffering injustices. But we are Christ's body in the world – a body that Mary knew needed preparing for sacrifice. And that preparation comes through regular worship together. The Christian value of working towards justice for all flows most naturally from its worshipping center.

And our text calls on us, each and every one of us, to be passionately extravagant where our common devotion to Christ is concerned.

Now, Trinity has never been extravagant in its spending by any means; yet my experience is that its discipleship most definitely follows in Mary's footsteps – in that Trinity has always placed a premium on recognizing the presence of Christ in each other and nurturing that above everything else. It is, in fact, what is most attractive about this congregation.

We *should* have an eye toward relieving suffering in every way we can. The best way to do that is by truly befriending the sufferer – by recognizing that we are indeed our brother's keeper, our sister's keeper – and that acts of hospitality and offers of friendship, and invitations to worship actually transmute the suffering into joy.

Over the last three years, the session has emphasized that what we do with our money, our treasure, is a spiritual act of the highest order – and that Stewardship season is the time to ask, “How much of what God has given me do I feel called to return?”

Further, the session has asked each and every one of us to consider the biblical tithe as a guide – that is to work toward giving away a tenth of our personal income each year to church and other worthy causes.

But it raises the question, “Why should I give a large portion of that to Trinity?”

Why would you want to give to Trinity over other non-profits that more directly relieve suffering?

Why? – because you value what Trinity stand for. Because Trinity stands for something precious.

In a world filled with leadership bent on dividing us into violent camps, Trinity is an oasis of persons on both sides of the theological and political spectrum who don’t just tolerate each other – but actually love each other. It is here in this place that polis and religio *do* come together.

And that marriage is made manifest in many ways. Its ministry and mission reflect that. That ministry and mission is reflected on the easel outside and on the little pamphlet you will receive this week that divides our ministry and mission into four main categories.

First and foremost, and to no one’s surprise given the focus of my sermon this morning, the marriage of religio and polis is seen the clearest in our ministry of Worship.

It is seen in the attention you place on the beauty of this space – on the ardor of your devotion to our Lord – those things that make the soul sing – great music, well planned, intentional liturgy that recognizes the movement of God among us, thoughtful preaching, clear, crisp sounds as evidenced by a new sound system – not to mention good fellowship and a genuine sense of loving community.

By paying a generous salary to a pastor to be in charge of all of this – you demonstrate the premium you place on worship.

You proclaim that same value by employing Carol Virkler’s gifts as our Organist and Coordinator of Music; and Steve Yates gifts as our choir director.

The marriage of polis and religio is seen also in our mission in 2019 to grow as disciples.

Christ’s great commission in Matthew was to “Go...make disciples...teaching them... everything I have commanded you.” At Trinity, we are called to learn what our faith in Jesus Christ means and how that is expressed in our daily lives. Trinity has a large cadre of gifted leaders and teachers who study God’s word on their own so that they can teach others the meaning of discipleship. This is seen in our commitment to Vacation Bible School, an upgraded adult library and children’s library, women’s circles, small groups, confirmation, acolyte training, special educational events, stewardship training and education, new member development and education, elder training, an elder retreat, and maintenance of multimedia systems throughout the church.

But that is not all. The love *for* and preparation *of* the body of Christ by bringing religio and polis together in 2019 will also be seen in our ministries of Caring and Connecting. Christ says in John, “By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples: if you have love for one another.” Living together in a community focused on Christ’s love not only changes us, it is the incarnate witness to the rest of the world that Christ has risen and is still in the process of transforming this world *with* his love.

And so, Trinity is ever-expanding as we actively seek out and include others through pastoral care and congregational care of members and friends of Trinity, refreshments before and after worship on Sunday mornings, stocking and restocking the kitchen for groups inside and outside the church, special outreach to those who have been visiting worship on Sunday mornings, our new Text in Church, and maintenance of our website and upgraded Facebook page.

Finally, we plan to make the marriage of polis and religio work in 2019 through our missions of serving and giving. Jesus says in Mark, “I did not come to be served but to serve.” We not only set aside resources to care for the marginalized, we use our gifts to be actively involved in the relief of suffering in the name of Christ. We support mission partners locally, nationally and globally.

Trinity’s giving to the denomination’s One Mission program is among the highest per capita in the whole denomination!

Locally, we also support Loaves and Fishes, the Wardrobe, and the Food Bank, provide space for Boy Scout Troop 4, Cub Scout, Girl Scout, and Brownie Troops, Women’s Symphony League, Columbia Garden Club, Mid-Missouri Dancers, AAUW, AA groups, Voluntary Action Center’s Adopt-a-Family Program, and many more. On top of all this, throughout the year Trinity will contribute to four special offerings and be actively involved in all sorts of other ways that provide for those on the margins.

A letter and brochure with these ministry and mission goals and a pledge card for the coming year will be mailed to you this week. And then on October 28, you are asked to ring your pledge card as we celebrate the dedication of our 2019 pledges to God at the end of the service.

God is doing amazing things here and I guarantee you that, as with Mary, extravagant giving to Trinity is never a waste. It is an act that is both political as well as religious – in the very best sense.

Let us pray: Gracious and most merciful God, never let us lose sight of your precious presence among us. Give us the same generosity that was Mary’s whose extravagant love still echoes down through the millennia.

Now bless this portion of what you have given us as we return it back to you for the purpose of bringing your love more fully into the world. In Christ’s name we pray, Amen