

“You Do Not Always Have Me”

The Thirty-Ninth in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 12:1-11; Deuteronomy 15:1-11

When he raised Lazarus from the dead, Jesus demonstrated for all to see that he is Son of God and Israel’s Messiah. But Israel’s religious leaders—the Sanhedrin and the high priest Caiaphas—were very troubled by the news that Jesus had returned to Jerusalem and was working miracles just a few days before the annual Passover. They were afraid that Jesus would return to Jerusalem during the Passover for a final showdown with the Sanhedrin. And so they had hatched a plot to arrest Jesus upon his return to the city, so that Jesus would then be put to death. Blind to the fact that Jesus was that one promised throughout the Old Testament, the Sanhedrin was worried that Jesus would do something to provoke the Romans to intervene and remove them from power. It was clear that many people had seen (or heard of) Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Jesus was already popular because he was a miracle-worker and messianic figure and now, Jesus had many new followers as a result of his seventh and greatest miracle to date. When Caiaphas proposed that Jesus die for the sake of the nation, his proposal was quickly agreed upon and the Pharisees made it known that if anyone saw Jesus or knew where he was, the Pharisees were to be informed. And if people are following Jesus because of Lazarus, then Lazarus should be arrested and put to death as well. . . Yes, it really has come to this.

We return to our series on the Gospel of John. We have come to the literary hinge of John’s Gospel—chapters 11-12—which serve to join the two halves of John’s Gospel together. The first 10 chapters of John deal with Jesus’ three-year messianic mission, while chapters 13-21 deal with those events surrounding the coming Passover, which include Jesus’ final instruction to his disciples (the Upper Room Discourse), his passion, and his resurrection (all of which take place during the last week of Jesus’ life). Chapters 11-12 serve as the transition from our Lord’s messianic mission to his Passion.

In John 11, we read of Jesus’ seventh and most dramatic miraculous sign, the raising of his dear friend Lazarus from the dead. We read of Jesus’ great sorrow at the death of his friend, as well as the grief experienced by Lazarus’ friends and family. When Jesus arrives at Lazarus’ tomb, he openly weeps. But what moves Jesus to such anguish? There is the spectacle of death itself. There is the tomb. Lazarus’ body is wrapped in linen and embalmed with spices to deal with decomposition—the cruelest reality of death. There is the wailing of the professional mourners along with Lazarus’ family and friends. The musicians play their somber funeral dirge. The family and friends are all grief stricken and wailing. Jesus rages in anger against what sin and death have done to the human race, including his dear friend.

John also tells us that a good number of people actually witnessed Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead. They saw the once-dead man now hopping and staggering out of his tomb, still bound by his grave clothes. Mary and Martha and Lazarus’ family certainly witnessed the miracle. So did a number of Jews from Jerusalem who had come to the graveyard near Bethany, a small village about two miles from Jerusalem, to pay their respects to Lazarus’ family. According to John, many of those who witnessed Jesus raise Lazarus believed in Jesus. Who else but the Son of God and Israel’s Messiah could raise a man who had been dead for four days?

But then a number of others went back to Jerusalem and told the Pharisees that Jesus had returned to the Jerusalem area, and that he had raised Lazarus from the dead. Instead of seeing this wonderful miracle as

the inescapable proof that the messianic age has dawned, the Pharisees are outraged and seek Jesus' arrest. Calling an emergency meeting of the Sanhedrin, the deeply divided Pharisees and Sadducees realize that in Jesus they face a common threat, and their religious and political differences immediately disappear. Collectively, the members of the Sanhedrin are afraid because Jesus has returned to Jerusalem just before the Passover—when the city would be packed with pilgrims from outlying areas. This could mean civil unrest, perhaps rioting, or Jesus doing something which would make him even more popular.

Rebuking the Sanhedrin for inactivity in the face of the threat Jesus posed to them all, the high priest that year, Caiaphas, suggested that the time had come for Jesus to die. Far better, he said, for Jesus to die for the nation, than for Jesus and his followers to be allowed to create a movement which threatened the tenuous peace with their Roman occupiers. Fearing that Jesus might disrupt the Passover celebration, which, in turn, would provoke the Romans to remove the Sanhedrin from power, a plan was hatched to put Jesus to death. Instead of embracing their Messiah, the Jewish religious establishment is now plotting to arrest Jesus and put him to death, which, ironically, leads to Jesus' death upon the cross and our salvation from sin. What men intend for evil, is often used by God to accomplish the greatest of good—in this case, the salvation of true Israel.

As we turn to our text, the first eleven verses of John 12, the whole tenor and tone of John's account changes again. Jesus has performed his seventh and greatest sign yet. The Passover is now just six days away. Jesus is about to enter Jerusalem as Israel's great messianic king (Palm Sunday). People are now following Jesus everywhere he goes. To avoid the treachery of the Sanhedrin, Jesus must move from Bethany to nearby Ephraim. There must have been the sense throughout the entire Jerusalem area that things were coming to a head, and that Jesus might even claim the throne of David, and bring Israel to that moment in redemptive history the nation had been expecting since the glory days of Solomon. Jesus had been speaking of how his hour is yet to come. Now, it seemed to all that his hour had indeed arrived.

As we read at the end of John 11, *“now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves. They were looking for Jesus and saying to one another as they stood in the temple, “What do you think? That he will not come to the feast at all?” Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where he was, he should let them know, so that they might arrest him.”* The plot to kill Jesus was now public. The buzz throughout the city is “what will happen next?” Will Jesus come to Jerusalem during the Passover, knowing he would be arrested and put to death? And what will the Romans do if Jesus clashes with the Sanhedrin? The fear of a negative reaction from the Romans, as John informs us, is that which motivates the Sanhedrin to act. These men are afraid of losing power over occupied Israel. Jesus is a threat to them, and so they seek to put him to death.

But as chapter 12 opens, we read of no miracles performed by Jesus, or of any lengthy teaching discourses. Nor do we read of the reactions of Mary, Martha, and especially Lazarus, in response to the great miracle Jesus had performed which proved that he was both the Son of God and Israel's Messiah. At the great moment of climax of Jesus' mission, just when you expect Jesus to begin his rule over Israel, instead, John tells us that Mary will anoint Jesus in preparation for his death and burial. Those actually present for these events, and who are caught up in the emotion and fervor of the moment, cannot possibly foresee those events which John is setting up for his reader/hearer: that the greatest event in human history is at hand and that every element in chapters 11-12 is taking us closer and closer to Jesus' death and resurrection as the Passover draws near.

I hate to keep harping on apparent contradictions, but since so many critical scholars act like these are

insurmountable obstacles to any notion that the Bible is the inerrant word of God, I feel it important to briefly address these supposed contradictions as we encounter them. Mary's act of anointing Jesus' feet at Bethany is also described in Mark 14:3-9 and Matthew 26:6-13. But they place this event after Jesus entered Jerusalem. In addition, Matthew and Mark tell us that this anointing takes place in the house of Simon the leper (who is not mentioned by John), while the woman who anoints Jesus' feet is not identified in the synoptics, although John identifies her as Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus.

One thing we need to notice is that Mark and Matthew tend to group events together by topic, not chronology. Furthermore, the few apparent discrepancies between John's account and the synoptics (Mark and Matthew), can easily be resolved. Take, for example, the fact that Matthew and Mark indicate that the perfume was poured on Jesus' head and body, while John says the perfume was applied to his feet. This is often taken as contradictory, or that John, Matthew, and Mark are each drawing from the same legend about Jesus' anointing. But the resolution to this is so simple that it is easy to overlook. John reports that Mary anointed Jesus' feet. The synoptics have an unnamed woman anointing Jesus' head and body. How about the fact that both are true? John gives her name, and there is certainly enough perfume for Mary to anoint Jesus' head, body, and feet. There is no contradiction here.¹

Luke, however, mentions another incident in which Jesus was anointed by an unnamed woman, while in the house of a Pharisee (Luke 7:36-38). In this case, a woman with a past is the one who anoints our Lord while wetting his feet with her tears, and then drying them with her hair. No doubt, Luke is referring to an entirely different event. So when issues like are raised, remember that Christians have addressed these supposed contradictions from the very beginning, and all of these supposed discrepancies have very simple and plausible resolutions. Don't panic when critical scholars claim that the Bible is full of contradictions. Critical scholars assume that the Bible cannot be factually true, and they often strain all credibility trying to find contradictions which are not there.

As we turn to our text, in verse 1 of chapter 12, John gives us a specific time reference and setting. "*Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.*" Jesus had been in nearby Ephraim, but returned to Bethany to see Lazarus and his family. Instead of the 24 hour clock we use, Jews considered Sundown as a day's end. Keeping this mind, we can fix the date of Jesus' arrival in Bethany as the Friday before Palm Sunday. Jesus returned to the Jerusalem area, because on Sunday, Jesus will enter Jerusalem in a grand messianic processional—an event which is not only epic in human terms, but also of biblical proportions, given the fact that so many messianic prophecies are fulfilled when Jesus triumphantly enters David's royal city.

We read in verse 2 that, "*they gave a dinner for [Jesus] there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table.*" If Jesus arrived in Bethany on Friday before sundown, then this meal would have been served after sundown on Saturday, once the Sabbath was over. Since the Sabbath was a day of rest, it would not be appropriate to serve a meal in someone's honor until the Sabbath was over. While I wish that John included a bit more information about the personal interaction between Jesus and Lazarus, or even a discussion of Lazarus' thoughts about being dead for four days, John does not include any such trivial information—other than Martha served (it was she who organized the meal), in the home of Simon. John's focus is upon the fact that Jesus' hour—which has been mentioned many times previously—is at hand. The meal—as important and joyful as it must have been—is not essential to the

¹ For a discussion of these apparent discrepancies, see: Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 426.

story. But what follows the meal is essential.

According to verse 3, “*Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.*” In order to fully understand the significance of Mary’s sacrificial act of devotion to Jesus, we need to understand that a pound of pure nard (actually eleven ounces), was a significant amount of perfume, and of great expense. While it was common to anoint honored guests with oil and scented spices when they entered your home on an occasion such as this, this was far out of the ordinary. Nard comes from the root of a plant which grows in India. The perfume made from the plant was very expensive, it had come to Bethany from a great distance, and may have been a cherished family heirloom which had been passed down from mother to daughter for many generations. You cannot simply go to nearest shopping mall and buy more. This is a cherished family possession and, no doubt, of great monetary value. Another sign of an eyewitness account is that John recalls how the unusual aroma of the perfume filled the house.

Mary’s gesture is a sign of her love for and devotion to Jesus. Her devotion is not in any sense romantic, and expresses her humble thanks for what Jesus has done for her family, her complete trust in him as Israel’s Messiah, as well as reverence for him and his messianic office. Breaking custom (a woman like Mary would never let her hair down in public) she anoints Jesus’ head, body, and his feet with her hair (if we add to John’s account the additional testimony from Matthew and Mark’s gospels). The image is one of absolute and total devotion to her master. What is more remarkable is that Jesus allows it.

According to Mark’s account, the disciples were all taken aback by the liberal use of such an expensive perfume. As far as we can tell, Jesus had never allowed himself to be the recipient of such a lavish gift or attention before. But in verses 4-5, one of the twelve disciples gives indignant verbal expression to what some of them were thinking. “*But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, ‘Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?’*” Under most circumstances, Judas’ might have a point. This bottle of nard could be sold for three hundred denarii, which was nearly a year’s wage for a working man. Such a sum could certainly help a large number of the poor, and it was quite unexcepted that Jesus would allow this.

But Judas was not worried about the poor, nor did he think Jesus worthy of such devotion. According to John (who composes this account looking back upon this event in hindsight), Judas was not at all the altruistic fellow he seemed to be. With the knowledge that Judas was about to betray Jesus, John tells us, Judas “*said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it.*” This side of Jesus’ death and resurrection, Judas was raising an important point. Why not use the money for the poor? Under normal circumstances his question made sense. Given the fact that the disciples’ money purse wasn’t regularly audited, no one yet knew that Judas had been helping himself to the group’s money. No doubt, looking back on these events, the disciples figured out after his death that Judas was not only the demonic betrayer of Jesus, he was also a common thief.

Yet, Jesus knew all about Judas from the moment he chose him to be a disciple—Judas was an unregenerate agent of Satan, whose own treachery would bring to pass an ancient prophecy that Israel’s Messiah would be betrayed by one of his own for a mere thirty pieces of silver. Jesus also knew that his hour is drawing near, and that the time had come that he be anointed for his death and burial. But such a thought was a million miles from everyone’s mind. The course of Jesus’ ministry was about to take a turn that no one present in Simon’s home at the dinner given in Jesus’ honor possibly could have known

or expected. Jesus is soon to die on a Roman cross as the true Passover Lamb, whose death will take away the sin of the world. Mary's devotion to Jesus and her anointing him with expensive perfume was in reality, a proper means of preparation for his death, although no one present could understand this until the events had transpired and they could look back on these things after the fact.

In response to Judas' objection that the nard should have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor, Jesus rebukes him. As we read in verses 7-8, "*Jesus said, 'Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me.'*" Mary was showing her full devotion to Jesus. There is no way she could know that what she was doing had such great significance beyond the walls of Simon's home. Just as Caiaphas' declaration about putting Jesus to death was spoken freely, and with evil intention, yet done in such a way that John could speak of Caiaphas words as prophetic, so too Mary's act of devotion has a significance far beyond her intention—which is simply to show Jesus her loving devotion and submission.

It also helps us understand the significance of her act, when we consider that such an expensive perfume was most often used at a time of burial. Families would often spend lavishly on professional mourners and musicians—especially if they were people of means. Spices too were expensive (and necessary due to the odor of decomposition), and the preparation of food for a large number of mourners was no small expense. People of means demonstrated their love and showed their depth of grief by spending sacrificially. Yet, Mary pours out most of the contents of her flask of perfume while anointing Jesus—some of which may have been used earlier in the anointing of Lazarus' body, although the text does not say so. Lazarus was well-loved, many mourned for him, and it is hard to imagine that Mary would withhold this perfume from her beloved brother's remains at the time of his death.

But in Simon's home at a dinner given in honor of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, Mary pours out most of the cherished perfume on Jesus—a year's wages worth—while he was *still alive*. Jesus not only allows her to do it, he tells those gathered in Simon's home why he is allowing it. Jesus informs those closest to him that it is indeed proper that Mary anoint Jesus rather than sell the alabaster bottle of nard and then give the money to the poor. According to Jesus, she will use this perfume again (what remains of it) when Jesus is anointed for his burial.² Nothing is said by Jesus about when he will be buried. Yet, if he is to be buried (and the implication is that this is not far off in the distant future) then first he must die. No doubt, the real import of Jesus' comment took a bit to sink in, because the immediate focus was the surprise generated by Jesus' rebuke of Judas' opinion that the perfume should have been sold, rather than wasted on anointing Jesus (the implication of Judas' comments).

Jesus cites from Deuteronomy 15:11 (a part of our Old Testament lesson), which declares "*for there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.'*" Blind to the things of God, Judas does not understand why the Son of God must be anointed. Furthermore, Jesus is not in any sense implying that those gathered in Simon's home should forget the poor and needy. On the contrary, Jesus says, the poor must be considered and helped because they will always be with us. This very point was assumed by the covenant which God ratified with Israel before the people entered the promised land (Deuteronomy). The poor will need help long after Jesus dies, is raised, and then ascends into heaven. But Jesus' hour is drawing near. Unlike the poor, he will not always be physically present with his people. Mary's act of devotion is not only appropriate in its own right—Jesus is about to enter Jerusalem as Israel's messianic

² Carson, The Gospel According to John, 430.

king, and then suffer and die for our sins—but this anointing by Mary anticipates his burial. Jesus has just told the guests in Simon’s home that he will soon die and that he will not always be with them. And it is this latter fact which explains the length and detail of the Upper Room Discourse, when Jesus prepares his disciples for this very thing.

If the nature of Jesus’ rebuke of Judas stunned everyone present, they will be even more stunned when they begin to realize the significance of what Jesus just said. Even as those present began to consider the words which Jesus just spoke, events were now taking a dark and ominous turn which will bring the messianic mission of Jesus to its climax with his passion. As we read in verse 9, Jesus’ notoriety was hardly a blessing. *“When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.”* Human nature was the same then as now. The presence of Jesus alone would draw a huge crowd of curious onlookers. But seeing Jesus together with Lazarus would really generate buzz. News that Jesus was back in Bethany quickly spread, and a large crowd gathered, as people were curious to see the man whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Add to this the fact that the Passover was drawing near, and pilgrims from outlying areas were arriving in Jerusalem in great numbers, and many of them, no doubt, had heard about Jesus and wanted to see him for themselves. The privacy of a dinner in Simon’s home became a public spectacle.

The resurrection of Lazarus was Jesus’ seventh and greatest miracle, and not only confirmed Jesus’ divine identity, but also served as a faint glimpse of things to come—Jesus’ own resurrection, and the general resurrection of the dead at the end of the age. This was a wonderful, dramatic, and important event in the course of redemptive history, and was the clearest sign yet that Jesus is Israel’s Messiah and that his mission was coming to its climax. Many were believing in Jesus and the people sensed that redemptive history was taking a dramatic turn.

But the Sanhedrin hated Jesus, as well as the man whom he raised from the dead, Lazarus, precisely because so many people flocked to see them in Bethany, and because far too many of those who did were now trusting in Jesus as a result. The Sanhedrin was afraid that Jesus was going to start a revolt, and as long as Lazarus was around, Jesus had credibility and support from the people beyond anything the Sanhedrin could handle. If they were going to arrest Jesus and put him to death, then they had better add Lazarus to the list. And so we read in verses 10-11, *“so the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.”* The irony of ironies . . . Israel’s Messiah had come to his people to save them from their sins, but all the Sanhedrin could see was a threat to their political power. Jesus had raised a man from the dead, and the Sanhedrin worried that because of him, people were believing in Jesus. For Caiaphas, there is a simple solution. Arrest them both, and then put them both to death.

Although those in Simon’s home did not yet understand the true significance of Mary’s act of devotion—preparing Jesus for his burial—Jesus begins preparing his disciples for what is about to come. If the poor will always remain, Jesus will not. He tells those present, *“you do not always have me.”* He will explain this in detail in the Upper Room Discourse, but as for those in Simon’s home, we can only wonder how this information was processed. Thankfully, Jesus does explain his absence before departing, and we, therefore, can celebrate his presence with us through the divinely means of his presence—his word and sacrament, through which the indwelling Holy Spirit ensures that we hear our Savior’s voice in his word, every bit as much as if we heard Jesus speak these words in Simon’s home. And that same body anointed by Mary, and which was given for us on the cross, we now receive, through faith, at this, the table of the Lord.