

Unbelievers have always had a hard time figuring out the lifestyle of Christ's disciples. Why would anybody choose to deny himself or herself of any pleasure — no matter how tasteless or vulgar — when life is so short? The Villages has a reputation, you know for living together outside marriage, and spreading STD's. Why would people whose lives are at least as busy as theirs carve out time every week for worship, for Bible study, for service projects that do nothing to advance their careers? Why would Christians get involved in the lives of those who are poor and sick, and hurting? Why would people who are carrying their load already as tax-paying citizens give ten percent or more of their income to the church?

See what I mean? People who don't know Jesus have a hard time figuring out why people would behave as Christians do! Our answer would be, of course, that we do these things because we love him. He loved us first. He's done so much for us and continues to do so much for us. And the more we understand that, the greater our love for him becomes. And because we love him, there is nothing we wouldn't do for him. He truly is our everything!

Our story this evening -- the breaking of the alabaster jar -- shows the difficulty. It is the simple story about a woman who, in the presence of Jesus Christ, was so overwhelmed by the wonder of who he was and by the thought of all he had done in her life, that she did for one time in her life that which many present thought was a foolish thing.

We continue our sermon series called Places of the Passion. Today we walk with Jesus to Bethany. The Jewish Passover is about to begin and Jesus is in Bethany. Bethany is just a mile east of Jerusalem, on the Mt. of Olives. Why stop at Bethany?

Because there were no empty hotel rooms in Jerusalem. Jerusalem's population at the time of Christ was about 30,000. During Passover, it would balloon to roughly 180,000 people. The city's population would increase six-fold! This is why Jesus stayed in Bethany—on the outskirts of Jerusalem—during Passover week.

While he was there, he was invited to the house of Simon the leper for a dinner in his honor. We don't know exactly who Simon the leper was. He obviously was a healed leper, or he wouldn't have been able to host a dinner party. Most likely, he is one of the many people Jesus touched and healed of that awful disease. I think it's interesting that he was now "Simon the Cured," but people were still calling him "Simon the Leper" because that's how he had been known for so long.

Some believe that he was a friend of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Others believe that he may even have been their father. At any rate, John tells us that those three were present along with Jesus, Martha helping to serve the food. The apostles were also there and perhaps a few others who aren't named. But Mary is the one on whom our story focuses. John tells us that she was the one who broke the precious alabaster jar and poured the perfume over Jesus.

Oils and perfumes were used widely in the ancient world. Guests entering a house would customarily be given water and a towel to wash their faces, hands, and feet. Often there would be oil to wipe on the dry, parched skin as well. And many families would save and buy an expensive flask of really good aromatic oil or perfume and keep it stored for funeral occasions. There was no embalming among the Israelites. Burial would be within hours after a

death, and the body would be washed, perfumed, and laid to rest.

So Mary came into the room with “an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard.” This expensive perfume was made from a plant grown principally in India. The jar likely as more of a flask whose neck would have to be broken to pour the oil out. So Mary broke it open and began to pour it on the head of Jesus.

Keep in mind this happened long before the time of Women’s Lib. It wasn’t this woman’s place to be where she was. Her place as a woman was in the kitchen. Mary should have been in there with Martha, helping to prepare and cook the meal, or so everyone thought. But she was so overwhelmed with love for Jesus that she just had to break tradition. So she took the alabaster jar of expensive perfume and broke it open. She poured it out until every drop was exhausted and the flask empty.

Why did Mary do what she did? This was her way of giving to Jesus. And it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out why Mary did that. Jesus had given her brother back to her from the dead. He had restored her friend or her father Simon back to health. She had heard from the disciples what Jesus had said about his impending death, and she wanted to show respect for him before he died. He had treated her with dignity and respect. And he had shared with her secrets of the kingdom of God. So she wanted to give Jesus something to let him know how much she loved him.

Then John writes, "Then one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, who would betray him, said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?'" (John 12:4-5). The NIV says that it was a year’s wages. One denarius was the amount of a normal working man’s wages for one day. So if this perfume was worth 300 denarii, then it was worth approximately one year’s salary for the average working man, at least 46,000 dollars in today’s money.

Now I suspect that Judas was right in his estimate of the value of that perfume. And we’re really not too surprised at his attitude because John goes on to inform us that he was a thief, stealing from the moneybag. But we are a little surprised when we read in Mark that the other apostles who were present also joined with Judas in their objection, apparently unable to appreciate the gift of love that Mary had given . They said, "This perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor." And indeed it could have.

Why did Jesus commend this woman then? It was not an issue of neglecting the poor. Jesus’ ministry proves his love and concern for them. It was simple. It was an issue of a broken container. It was a matter of a vessel that had been broken and now could only be used completely with nothing held back.

And the vessel that was broken, the vessel that won the praise of Jesus was Mary herself. The broken alabaster container was only a tangible manifestation of a much more significant breaking that had already happened. In her love for Jesus, Mary was holding nothing back. Like the broken jar that had to be completely spent once it was broken, so Mary could keep back not one thing in her devotion. She did not give herself halfway. She did not give part. She gave herself completely and unreservedly. That’s what was going on there at the table in

Bethany. Jesus praises her because that total surrender, that complete giving, that all-out, totally sold-out life is precisely what he wants for every one of his people! Mary was doing it. The disciples ... well ... they still didn't get it.

“But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, ‘Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me. In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial.’” (Matthew 26:10, 12) Beautiful? The cross? Indeed! Mary knew about these verses in Matthew's Gospel. Matthew 1:21, “She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” Matthew 20:28, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Matthew 26:28, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” “In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial.” “Burial.”

Burial, of course, implies death. And what a death it would be! Betrayed by Judas. Denied by Peter. Sentenced by Pilate. Scourged by soldiers. Mocked by the crowds. Abandoned by his Father. Christ's death pays for all sin, for all people, for all time. All sin. All people. All time. Mary gives Jesus everything she has. Mary prepares Jesus to give everything he has. And the room is filled with the smell of costly perfume!

Smells are powerful, aren't they? The smell of a rose catches your nose. Suddenly, you remember your first date in high school—when he brought you a dozen roses. Or maybe it's the scent of our grandmother's perfume, and memories of our grandmother come flooding back. While words go to the thinking part of our brain, smells go to the emotional part of our brain. That's why a whiff of grandma's perfume brings back our emotions for grandma. Smells can stir in us some very powerful emotions. That's also true for Jesus. Mary's strong perfume lingers with Jesus throughout Holy Week—as he makes his way to the cross, marking him with one word—give, give your all as Mary gave her all for me.

So, what's that mean for you? Quit hiding behind the comfortable and expedient.. Break the vessel. Go all out. Actively look for ways to serve at your church, and plug yourself in. If there are volunteer places to serve, sign up. Don't arrive at your funeral with unused energies, hoarded hours, and stockpiled resources. Spend what you've got, now. Spend it doing what God gives you to do. Spend it in service to Christ and his people.

Follow the example of Mary. Break the bottle. Pour out your love and appreciation to Jesus who gave his very all for us. Matthew 26:13 states, “Wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.” Why is that? Because the kingdom of God isn't about hoarding and stockpiling. The kingdom of God isn't about being chintzy and cheap. The kingdom of God isn't about get. Get will kill us. Always and forevermore God's kingdom is about one word—give. It's the most powerful word on the planet. G-I-V-E. Give. Amen