

EXTRAVAGANCE
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John 12: 1 – 8
March 21, 2010 (Fifth in Lent)

Did Mary understand what no one else could see or wanted to believe? Did she know that what was ahead for Jesus was going to be bad?

Is that why she used the whole jar of the expensive oil – the nard – on Jesus' feet?

It was an extravagant gesture. What had Mary seen in Jesus that was worth any price?

Judas was also there. If Mary understands what is to come for Jesus, what does Judas understand? If Mary's gesture is symbolic of the extravagance of God's love she had seen in Jesus, how large is that love? Is Judas included, loved by Jesus in spite of the betrayal? Or is Judas in the end just a lost soul?

Prior to the crucifixion of Jesus, the name, Judas, was an honored and popular name. Two centuries before Christ, one Judas Maccabeus led a successful armed uprising, defeating the occupying Syrians and restoring the desecrated Temple in Jerusalem – an event still remembered and observed as Hanukkah. And though the Romans reoccupied Israel, Judas Maccabeus was revered as a warrior-priest, and the name Judas was worn with pride.

But would anyone now name a son Judas? Even those with little knowledge about the Jesus Story know that Judas was the betrayer: the one who sold out for 30 pieces of silver; who told the authorities where they could catch Jesus alone, away from any supporting crowd.

So what can we know from scripture about Judas Iscariot?

Iscariot was not his last name. People didn't have last names. Rather, a person's place of origin was added, like Jesus of Nazareth. And Iscariot is a compounded name meaning, "from Keriot." Judas Iscariot is Judas from the village of Keriot.

And Keriot was in the southern region of Judea. That may be important because Jesus and the other disciples were from the northern region of Galilee. And the north and south were different. It would be like if Judas was from Alabama, and Jesus and the others were from Seattle, San Francisco, or Eugene. Judas would have a southern accent and not drink designer coffees.

Did Judas feel like the outsider? Alienation can cause a festering anger that one day spills over. Workplace and school shootings happen because someone feels like a misfit. Is that what caused Judas to finally do what he did?

Over the centuries, in sermons, literature, and art, Judas has been depicted as the bad apple from the beginning. In paintings of the disciples, he is the one with the dark aura about him.

But that seems too simple to me. What about you? Have you thought about what might have motivated Judas?

Judas, like the other eleven disciples, had given up whatever he had to follow Jesus. There must have been a significant commitment to Jesus in the beginning. And when Jesus predicted that someone would betray him, no one looked right to Judas as if he was clearly the treacherous one all along.

So, maybe Judas did it for the money. The writer of John's Gospel thought so. There's that parenthetical editorial in the text accusing Judas of stealing from the disciple's common purse.

Was it greed that motivated Judas? We know the power of greed – don't we? We are suffering the consequences now of an economic culture where greed trumped the common good.

Or maybe Judas clearly saw what was ahead and it scared him. Jesus had rocked the boat too many times. And Judas knew it was going to get ugly. So he did what he did to save his own skin.

Some have conjectured that Judas was just trying to force Jesus' hand. That he got tired of waiting for Jesus to take things by storm. Judas wanted action, not parables and blessings of children. A real revolution, not more hanging around the sick and powerless. So why not force the issue? Put Jesus in a position where he had to act decisively.

Or did Judas just become disillusioned? Maybe he had hoped Jesus was going to be the next great warrior-priest, like Judas' namesake, Judas Maccabeus. But instead of organizing an army, Jesus talked about peace-making and praying for enemies. Instead of increasing his political base, Jesus' message was about a spiritual realm based on mercy, forgiveness, healing. Instead of building a movement to be reckoned with, Jesus spent more time with the poor and powerless.

Did Judas, then, just become disillusioned? Or was it greed, fear, alienation, a lust for power, that caused Judas to betray the One he had called Lord?

Or maybe, because nothing human is uncomplicated, it was something of all of these.

We can in the end only conjecture what was in the heart and mind of Judas. Indeed, we have enough trouble knowing our own heart and mind – don't we?

I mean, how many times in your life have you acted or not acted and wondered later: What was I thinking? What could have motivated me to do that stupid thing, say those hurtful words, done nothing when I could have helped?

We don't mean to do harm, but then we do. We don't think of ourselves as being angry or vengeful, and then we explode in a way that surprises and appalls us.

There's the meanness that seems to come out of nowhere. There's the stretching of the truth that we know isn't right even as the words come out of our mouths. Or there's the manipulation of another to meet our own needs. There's the word of gossip that really is about our own ego and insecurity.

And later we look in the mirror and ask, why?

The Apostle Paul, in his great Letter to the Romans, wrote: "I don't understand my own actions. For I do the very thing I hate. I know what God wants and I don't do it."

We can be such mysteries to ourselves – can't we? Sometimes it takes years of therapy and a lifetime of self-reflection to get a handle on why we do what we do. And even then there are more questions about us than answers.

So who knows why Judas did what he did. My guess is Judas didn't really understand his own betrayal of Jesus. Scripture says Judas had second thoughts and returned the money. And there is the tradition of Judas taking his own life in remorse.

Then, across the centuries it's been debated: Did Judas commit the unforgivable sin? Was he, in the end, beyond the reach of God's love? Are there those who are just lost? Those beyond saving?

I get asked all the time: What about Hitler, Stalin, Timothy McVeigh, Osama bin Laden? Aren't there people whose acts are so heinous, who are so evil, that you can't use their names and God's mercy in the same sentence?

I'm never sure how to answer that. If I'm being asked to define the outer limits of God's love, I can't. But I do know that in one of the ancient creeds of the early church – the Apostle's Creed – there is the faith affirmation that after Jesus was “dead and buried, he descended to hell...”

Is that a way of saying that the extravagance of God's love made known in Jesus is a love without limits? Does it mean that God never gives up on a human being? That God, in and through the Christ Spirit, will pursue us no matter what hell we make for ourselves.

I hope that's what it means. For Judas' sake...and my own....

“Leave her alone,” Jesus says when Judas objects to Mary's extravagant gesture. Was it Jesus' way of saying that Mary understands something deep and powerful and saving about God's unbounded love?

If only our brother Judas had understood it too....

The oil Mary used, nard, comes from Spikenard, which is a flowering plant that only grows in the Himalayas. The bell shaped flowers can be crushed and distilled into an intensely aromatic oil – nard – that smells like lavender.

Usually, only a drop or two is used, because it is so expensive and the fragrance so intense. Imagine the aroma when Mary emptied the jar.

And the whole house was filled, it says, with the fragrance – lavender.

Coincidentally, or not, I bought and planted two lavender plants yesterday. The fragrance of the plants was wonderful, extravagant.

Do you like the smell of lavender?

If not lavender, what does the fragrance of God's extravagant love smell like in your life?