

April 6 2025

Break & Spill!

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I'm going to start my sermon this morning with a statement that might surprise you: I'm so grateful for Judas in this morning's gospel reading

Hear me out!

Judas might have a well-deserved bad wrap in the church, the whole betraying Jesus thing – but Judas also, and in particular in John's gospel, acts more like a literary foil for Jesus and Jesus' ministry of radical love and mercy and grace

Judas embodies and speaks for the binary opposite of good discipleship – a good disciple gets Jesus ministry and isn't threatened by it, a bad disciple doesn't get Jesus' ministry and betrays him to the authorities

Or, in this morning's text it may be a bit more subtle but it's still there – in this morning's reading, Judas is the binary opposite of one of Jesus' greatest disciples...no, not Peter, Mary of Bethany

You may recall hearing about her sitting at Jesus' feet listening to him teach one of the last times he was at her house

Mary of Bethany is given the honor of being the character who breaks a jar of expensive nard – an anointing oil of great fragrance and cost – and washes Jesus' feet with it

This story is so important that all four gospel writers tell it – they all tell it a little differently, Mary of Bethany is given the honor of this role only in John's gospel – in the other gospels the woman is unnamed, sometimes believed to be Mary Magdalene, or a woman who was a prostitute because the early Church Fathers couldn't fathom how else a woman would have had means to purchase so great a treasure as this jar of nard

I digress...back to this morning's pericope

Mary of Bethany is the binary opposite to Judas

Jesus is days away from entering Jerusalem and the weight of the time must have been felt by all those who traveled with him

He enters the house of his friends Mary, Martha, and the recently resurrected Lazarus, their brother, for a meal

Mary carries out an act of extravagance, intimacy, and vulnerability – she breaks a jar of fragrant nard and pours the *whole* thing on Jesus' feet

To sop up the abundance of oil, she uses not only her hands but her hair

In both shock and disgust, Judas makes a stink and inquires why she would do such a thing? Wouldn't it have been better to sell this expensive oil and give the money to the poor

Jesus responds with an interesting and challenging comment: "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

But before we respond to Jesus' comment, let's stay with Mary and Judas because there is a little bit of a stand off here: a stand off between extravagance and reservation, between intimacy and self-restraint, between vulnerability and calculated risk

Emerson Powery, Messiah University (PA): For Mary, the cost of the sacrifice was irrelevant. For Judas, symbolic actions should be cost-effective.¹

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-john-121-8-5>

And then, to really make his point, Judas pulls Torah on Jesus with his “aren’t we supposed to care for the poor” comment which likely resonates with Jesus and the other friends in the room because he’s paraphrasing a commandment in Deuteronomy that says: “Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land.’ (Deut. 15:11)

Not only is Judas a bit more fiscally cautious than Mary, he’s also quoting the rule book

And now to Jesus’ response, which could be translated as “Judas, read the room!” – of course there will always be poverty and we are to center the poor in our ministry, and my death is imminent!

Yes, of course – you’ll have lots of opportunities to extend generosity and care to the poor, and we are at a crossroads here, do you not sense what’s about to happen?

We are at a crossroads – something big is about to happen – something extraordinary is being asked of us: do we respond with extravagance or reservation, intimacy or self-restraint, vulnerability or calculated risk

I must admit that I’ve seen this Judas-Mary debate play out many times in my time as an ordained leader in the church

I started seminary the first year after the ELCA changed their policy to allow LGBTQ+ leaders serve the church openly and in partnered relationships

I was so stinking proud of my church – partly because I was one of “those” people seeking to lead the church, but also I had been an observer of this process in my denomination for the previous 10 years and I had watched as Assembly after Assembly (the equivalent of our Convention after Convention) and I heard the leaders of our church say “we’re not ready, there are other pressing issues”...for all I know, they could have almost quoted Judas chapter and verse

They certainly embodied his reservation, his self-restraint, and his fear of vulnerability

And hear me when I say, that as frustrated as I was those ten years, I love my siblings in Christ and I mean in no way to demean them

But, I do fear that, like Judas, they operated out of fear over freedom, scarcity over abundance

When I stepped foot on my seminary's campus that fall at the Lutheran seminary in Berkeley where the movement to welcome LGBTQ+ leaders had a strong following, I expected there to be a celebratory mood

But I was greeted with reservation: "sure we're excited, but we have some donors and supporting congregations who aren't as excited as we are so we're just going to lay low"

...really made me feel welcome, huh?

So many denominations have wrestled with this question – probably the most attention given recently to our Methodist siblings

But this Judas-Mary debate appears at other critical moments, too – I've seen it when congregations are declining and trying to discern a path forward, or when denominations are asked to reckon with racism

Some of our leaders take their cue from Mary and they respond with extravagance, intimacy, and vulnerability

And some of our leaders take their cue from Judas and they respond with reservation, self-restraint, and *if anything* calculated risk

The book of 2 months book that we read in January and February, "The Church Cracked Open" literally gets its name from this story in the

scripture: Stephanie Spellers, the author, believes that the church needs to be cracked open so that it can reckon with its history as chaplain to empire and it's only once we empty ourselves that we can even come close to putting the pieces back together to create whatever will come as a result

Judas says: don't break the jar, it's too precious! don't spill the nard, it's too costly!

Mary of Bethany, Stephanie Spellers, and the likes of leaders that I would dare to include are folks like Martin Luther King Jr, former Bishop Michael Curry, they all say: break the jar! Spill out the nard!

It begs the question: is there anything so valuable, so precious, that we dare not break the jar and spill its contents?

And perhaps there are times when the answer might be yes – Judas, *was* a disciple of Jesus for a while before he acted in fear and betrayed him

But when I consider this question from a Christian perspective now, from the perspective of a disciple today, one of our most prized possessions in our faith is the story of Jesus: of his love, his mercy, his grace, his offer of salvation-health-wholeness

And, his response in this debate this morning and in so many places in the gospel narratives is extravagance, intimacy, and vulnerability

Break the jar! Spill the nard! Let it flow all over you and all over the ones you love!

There are likely so many places in your life where the weight of a crossroads bears you down and you are wondering what to do – in personal relationships or family dynamics, in your workplace or school setting, in our communities and in our politics, and maybe even in our church

Judas' response makes so much sense to our sensibilities - reservation, self-restraint, calculated risk

But, I pray you this morning to consider letting go – that sometimes circumstances absolutely call us to respond with extravagant love and grace, to allow intimacy and vulnerability to be as sure a guide as the commandments, or constitutions, or general rules of conduct that otherwise guide our livelihoods

Stephanie Spellers writes in the introduction to her book, “[Jesus] must have valued [Mary’s] ability to discern what's important. Some disciples obsessed over the container, but what good is an exquisite jar if the ointment it holds can't get out? Others were anxious about losing the expensive nard, but what good is life-giving ointment if you don't share it with people in their time of need? [Mary] broke the jar. She poured out the oil. God blesses her for that.”

May God bless you, too - break the jar, spill the oil!

Amen.