

MARY OF BETHANY AND JUDAS ISCARIOT
A STUDY IN CONTRASTS
John 12:1-8
Preached by Dr. Cahill
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With his name forever linked with betrayal, poor Judas just can't catch a break. We can only speculate why Judas went so wrong. Some say Judas simply became disillusioned with the Pale Galilean, and changed sides. Others wonder if his motivation was to maneuver Jesus into a situation that would force his hand to publically identify himself as the Messiah and claim the throne of David. If that's the case, perhaps Judas saw himself as a savvy political operative whose Machiavellian skills were needed to prod Jesus from being meek and mild and take charge of things. But maybe Judas sensed his scheming was all for nothing after asking the sensible question, "Why wasn't this costly perfume sold for three hundred denari and its proceeds given over to the poor?" only to have Jesus publically rebuke and embarrass Judas while defending and condoning Mary's extravagant offering. "Leave her alone Judas, she bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

At this point in John's Gospel events were beginning to move fast. Jesus signed his own death warrant the moment he called Mary's brother Lazarus out from his tomb just outside the village of Bethany, and just a stone's throw from Jerusalem. Very quickly the news spread. Everybody was talking about it as preparations were being made for the Passover and pilgrims from all over were streaming into the Holy City.

When you piece these events together, it's obvious both the location and timing of Lazarus' resurrection were intentional. Jesus was setting himself up for his crucifixion and the religious establishment, led by Caiaphas predictably took their cues and played their parts as Jesus knew they would.

Calling an emergency meeting to manage the crisis Caiaphas gathered together his Council. "What are we to do?" they asked each other. "This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him and the Romans will come and destroy our holy place and the nation?" (John 12:47-48)

Had they taken the time to get to know Jesus, instead of fearing him from afar, maybe they'd realize what Pilate later came to realize, Jesus was no political threat whatsoever. Yet driven by their worst fears and gross misreading of the situation, they came to a horrendous conclusion, it was better, "to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." (John 12:50)

Ironically, their decision to put Jesus to death to save the people from destruction was seamlessly enfolded into God's plan, set in place from the very beginning, for the salvation of the world.

This is the background providing the context of the story of Mary anointing Jesus' feet. Let's now, envision the immediate setting. Soon after Jesus raised up Lazarus from his tomb, maybe even that very evening, neighbors and friends, the twelve disciples and of course Jesus celebrated this unprecedented and remarkable event.

Probably no one there imagined that while they celebrated plots were being laid for Jesus' arrest and trial, except Jesus and possibly Mary who suddenly took everyone by surprise by anointing Jesus' feet.

Was this extravagant gesture of gratitude made to Jesus for his restoring her beloved brother back to her, or did Mary, who had a peculiar intuition about certain things, put two and two together and suddenly realized Lazarus' life meant Jesus' death! Certainly she knew the news was spreading but did she also hear there was already blowback coming from the temple?

Whatever the case, Mary's anointing prepared Jesus for the week ahead, starting the very next day when he mounted the donkey and rode triumphantly into Jerusalem and his rendezvous with the cross.

But before we get ahead of ourselves, let's keep focused on what happened in Lazarus' house that night. It's not a stretch to say Judas' criticism aborted Jesus' ability to savor the moment. That's why his quick rebuke quieted the room and probably embarrassed and angered Judas. ("How dare Jesus speak to me like that!") Could it be possible this incident planted the seeds for Judas' betrayal? It's not until they were together in the Upper Room that John reports, "Satan came into Judas" but that doesn't mean Judas wasn't plotting anything before hand, whatever his motivation.

Now, having set the context of this story in the larger narrative as well as setting the scene of the celebration that night, especially Judas' blunt objection and Jesus' sharp rebuke, what is God's message to you and me as members of his Church, the Body of Christ?

Let me suggest a few things. First: besides Jesus we've two other named players in this scene, Mary and Judas. What can we learn about ourselves from Mary and emulate, and from Judas and avoid.

Let's begin with this: Mary and Judas are on opposite ends of the spectrum. Mary loved and trusted Jesus with her life and was intensely in sync with his moods and aspirations. Judas, on the other hand, lost his trust in Jesus and then his soul. Whether or not his motivation for embezzling from their common purse was pure greed, hurt pride or simply becoming disillusioned with Jesus is up for speculation. Either way the "Judas syndrome" should sound warning bells because his disintegrating trust in Jesus, plus his

delusional attempts to circumvent Jesus' authority and glory eventually drove him to the suicide after realizing he betrayed the one he once loved.

If Mary of Bethany and Judas Iscariot are on the extreme ends of the spectrum I dare say you and I are somewhere in the middle, sometimes treading towards Mary, other times towards Judas.

I hope you have at least the occasional day when you sense you're really in sync with Jesus. Having a commitment to daily prayer and meditation will focus you, helping you become more in touch with your humanity then leading you to experience a peace and trust that liberates your attitudes and behaviors. You're freed up enough to take risks and make sacrifices for others because you want to please God your Father and become more like Jesus your brother. These are the days you trend towards Mary.

Other days, like Judas you may feel unappreciated for your talents and sometimes feeling you're being unjustly called on the carpet for speaking your mind. These hurts, imagined or real, fester until they distort your perceptions. You begin to distance yourself from God and do hurtful things to others in retaliation for their perceived assaults on your ego. You're out for justice, that's what you tell yourself, really your out for revenge. As I try to understand Judas, even have empathy for him, I wonder if these things contributed to his decision to betray Jesus.

Notice I said, "his decision" to betray Jesus. Judas wasn't God's flunky, set up from before the beginning of time to take the fall to be the betrayer of Jesus.

Remember Benedict Arnold? During our War of Independence one of General Washington's most trusted friends, Arnold came to believe his contributions to the American cause, which were substantial, were nevertheless unappreciated, especially when he was justly criticized for being corrupt. Even though Washington had Arnold's back and favored him in many ways, Arnold in a fit of self-pity decided to betray Washington and his country for money and position.

If Arnold sounds like a latter day Judas, keep in mind you and I are capable of getting stuck in the same rut of self pity and then acting on it.

You may have noticed I've given more time speaking about Judas than speaking about Mary, probably because we need to deal with our trending towards Judas before we can become more like Mary.

Lent is meant to be a season especially set aside for prayerful introspection leading to repentance and culminating in our redemption and transformation. And by prayerful introspection I mean getting to know the real you hiding behind the public image we want everyone to respect and admire. It's emotionally and spiritually healthy to examine your conscience, asking God to help you discern how you've been right and where you've gone wrong and especially taking care to keep any perceived wrongs done against you from betraying your highest ideals, your friends or your Lord.

Next Sunday as Jesus parades into Jerusalem and the high drama of Holy Week we see normally righteous and respectable men doing dishonorable even treacherous things to protect and justify themselves and their way of life. Watch them in action until you see yourself, but especially watch out for Jesus, go with him to the cross and there see him take away the sins of the world.