

April 7, Fifth Sunday in Lent (John 12:1-8)

Judas is right: what Mary does makes no sense.

by [Justo L. González](#) in the [March 13, 2019](#) issue

It has been said that Jesus eats his way through Luke's Gospel, from which most of this year's Gospel texts come. Now, this last Sunday before Holy Week, we shift from Luke to a passage from John—and this too has to do with a meal.

This should not surprise us, for throughout history the main act of Christian worship has been a meal. We can imagine countless of our ancestors in the faith reading this passage just as we read it now and preparing to share in the meal just as we do. This meal in John takes place just before the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, which we will be observing next week. Therefore, the text is particularly appropriate for this Sunday.

This is a friendly meal in which Jesus, apparently along with some of his closest disciples, is invited to dine at the house of Martha, in Bethany. John has not told us about the other meal in the same house of which Luke tells us, the one in which Martha does the chores of a hostess while her sister, Mary, sits at the feet of Jesus. John introduces these two women and their brother, Lazarus, just a chapter earlier, when Lazarus is raised from the tomb. As in Luke's story, Martha is serving. A pragmatist, she knows what has to be done and does it. We are not told what Mary is doing until she does an unexpected thing: she anoints the feet of Jesus with a very expensive perfume—the equivalent of a year's wages for an average worker—and then wipes his feet with her hair.

Now another character comes onto the scene. This is Judas Iscariot, who will soon betray his master. Judas seems to be even more pragmatic than Martha. He criticizes Mary's action as an unnecessary waste of what could have been put to better use by feeding the poor. The Gospel passage explains that he does not say this out of concern for the poor but rather because he is a thief and covets the money. But leaving that aside, Judas is right: what Mary has done seems senseless in a world of so much need.

Yet Jesus reprimands Judas, telling him—and all those present—that Mary has anointed him in preparation for burial. And then he justifies her by pointing out that it will always be possible to serve the poor, but that Jesus himself will not always be with them. Mary is justified in her apparent waste not because the poor are not important, but rather because she takes a unique opportunity to express her overwhelming gratitude and love for her master.

The text puts Judas in a bad light—with good reason!—and Luke’s story leads us to think of Martha as less spiritually inclined than Mary. Therefore, we rightly admire Mary’s love and extravagant generosity, particularly since Jesus himself praises her.

But the truth is that quite often we are more like Martha or even like Judas. In the midst of a pragmatic society, we wish to be efficient, to make certain that everything counts and that there is no waste. In the church we look for responsible budgets that make the best possible use of every cent. This is a requirement of responsible stewardship. However, for this to be true Christian stewardship it must be founded not primarily on efficiency but on an overwhelming love that leads to what others may consider mere waste.

We are preparing to celebrate Easter and the events surrounding it. It is a difficult time to be celebrating anything. There are millions of refugees around the world and even next door, who live in miserable conditions, who sometimes do not even have enough to eat. We have turned politics into a cutthroat game in which the purpose is not to serve the needs of as many as possible but rather to amass as much power as one can while excluding those seen as “others.” Throughout the world, all sorts of interests are involved in a runaway race to see who can gain the largest margins of profit, even at the cost of destroying the environment. And the list goes on. It is a list of pain, abuse, pestilence, greed, folly, selfishness, prejudice, and destruction.

How can we celebrate in the midst of such circumstances? How can we spend resources and energy preparing choirs to perform beautiful music, embellishing our church buildings, buying Easter lilies, sending greetings to others, and organizing pageants?

Obviously, we can justify some of this on a purely pragmatic basis. If the church has beautiful music, attractive decorations, and well-designed pageants, perhaps more people will come and offerings will rise. All of this may be true. It may even be proper. But this is not the reason for our joyful celebrations and extravagant actions.

The true justification is at another level. Mary spills her perfume with wild abandon for no other reason than this: Jesus is there. There is no calculation here, no consideration for efficiency, no sense that this is a waste. There is nothing but sheer love and gratitude for what Jesus has done.

This does not mean that the poor are not important. On the contrary, Jesus establishes a parallel between himself and the poor. Now he is present, and Mary rightly feels the need to be extravagant. When he is no longer present in the flesh, the poor will still be there—to be served with the same extravagance.