

A rite of spontaneous love (John 12:1-8)

Mary has learned that God spares nothing in loving us.

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Six days before the Passover, Jesus attends a dinner at the home of his friends.

Martha is serving, as in Luke 10:38-42. Lazarus is reclining at the table with Jesus. Mary comes to the table with a pound of genuine, expensive myrrh, an anointing and burial ointment. She chooses to expend it on Jesus amid the meal. She knows there might not be an opportunity later.

It is customary for a servant or host to wash their guest's feet upon arriving for a meal—a posture Jesus himself assumes in John 13. It is customary to anoint the body of the deceased prior to burial, as the women do in Matthew, Mark, and Luke and as Nicodemus does in John 19. Mary enacts a spontaneous conflation of these rituals. Her rite is lavish, intimate, and sensual. She takes the myrrh and anoints Jesus' feet, wiping them with her hair. The house fills with the fragrance of the myrrh.

We can imagine how the dinner would proceed: the light dims and oil lamps glow, the wine flows, tears mix with laughter. The diners and disciples listen to their Teacher one more time. They know that the danger is near, that the hours are few, and they savor the moments they have shared. They gather strength for the coming dawn. We can imagine that Mary's spontaneous, creative ritual act sets a tone for the rest of the evening. The meal sustains and soothes all of them.

But this imaginary scene is not the one that unfolds. Instead, Judas Iscariot interrogates Mary and criticizes her improvised rite. What a waste. Why now? The myrrh could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Some of us will be tempted by Judas and his calculus of care. Yes, Judas, we think, why waste expense on rite, on ritual, on celebrating life's poignant moments, on pastoral care?

If we follow the computations of Judas, the balance is a stingy refusal to celebrate liturgy or life, to mourn, to feel—all the while giving generously (or guiltily, or self-righteously but begrudgingly) to the poor. But our improvised rites, our outpourings of celebration, our vulnerable giving and receiving of love, and our sustained care for the poor are not columns that cancel each other out in God's accounting. In God's economy comfort is always on offer. Love and grace are free. The Son of Man comes eating and drinking, healing, and multiplying the loaves for the hungry and poor.

Mary makes her calculation accordingly. She lavishes love and grace on Jesus when she has the chance. The typological imagination of the Revised Common Lectionary pairs the Gospel reading with lavish images of God making rivers bubble up in the desert, giving drink outpoured, turning our tears into joy, and forming a people made to praise.

Thankfully, Jesus has Judas's number and calls his bluff. Jesus commends Mary's spontaneous love, ritualized and embodied and enacted now. It is not profligate but prophetic. Mary has learned from sitting at his feet and listening to his teaching that God spares nothing in loving us and asks us to spare nothing in loving each other. Jesus himself accepts and appreciates Mary's rite of care and compassion. The act exceeds words, as good rituals do.

When God gives, there is never a waste. So as the gospel teaches: break open the good wine tonight. Have a pop-up dinner party. Invite a hurting friend. Touch the friend who is ill or afraid. Cradle the child. Spare no expense on the healing balm. Don't waste one drop or one moment. Jesus celebrates Mary's lavish rite of spontaneous love. Together they invite us to celebrate our rites of spontaneous love right now.