

What Matters Most?

by Veronica Garcia-Robles

(Scripture Lessons: John 12:1-8 & Philippians 3:4b-14)

What matters the most to you? In your life, in your daily living, what do you give importance to? I ask you this today, because both of our scriptures for this morning, though they are quite different from one another, focuses on this question.

So, let's start with the gospel. As we hear the story unfold, there is a lot going on in those short 8 verses. You can almost picture it in your mind. It is 6 days before the Passover, when we find Jesus in the house of Lazarus. So, imagine, the house is abuzz with activity. Martha's been working all day making a special dinner for Jesus, their honored guest. Lazarus is entertaining his many guests as he sits at the table with Jesus. Just imagine all the talk, the laughter, the noises and the smells from meal being cooked. Everyone is having a good time, enjoying each other's company. And then, something unexpected happens. Mary, takes a pound of pure nard, which is a perfumed ointment that's quite expensive, and according to my bible footnotes, is a product that it is imported all the way from the Himalayas. So, she pours it on Jesus' feet and then wipes his feet with her hair, until the entire house is filled with the fragrance of that perfume. And, at this point, Judas Iscariot, the disciple of Jesus who later on is going to betray him, gets angry. He questioned, 'Why didn't we sell this perfume she just used for the 300 Denarii that it was worth and give the money to the poor?'. But then, Jesus stands up for Mary. He tells Judas, "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." (John 12:7-8)

What a powerful scene today's scripture has set before us. Now what do you think matters to the people in the story?

Lazarus has kept himself busy entertaining his guests. Martha is busy cooking up a storm and serving everyone. And if she is anything like I am when I have guests, she won't rest until everyone is served and well fed by the end of the night. I imagine that what matters most to them both is making sure that everything goes smoothly and everyone is happy and well looked after.

Now, Mary did something very self-less, which showed great love towards Jesus. Not only did she spend all her money on very expensive, extravagant ointment for Jesus, but her actions speak louder than words. She pours the pound of oil liberally and washes his feet with the ointment. For Mary to do this, it cost her more than the 300 Denarii she spent on the ointment...she greatly humbled herself, even more so when she dried

his feet with her hair. It was certainly a necessary act during that time when entering a home that people's feet would be washed after walking the dusty, muddy roads in sandals. But, it was an act normally performed by lowly servants. So, when Mary kneeled before Jesus, wiping away the ointment with her hair, no less, I imagine that only thing that mattered to Mary in that intimate moment was to show Jesus just how much she loved him, even in humbling herself to such a degree. He was her Lord, and whatever the cost, however much the extravagance it may have seemed to anyone else, she wanted to give all she had of herself in that moment to worship and honor Jesus.

Now, Judas's outburst might make you think that that what matters to him is the poor when he reprimands Mary for not selling the nard and donating the money. But, the bible mentions that Judas said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because what mattered to Judas was the money, since as a thief, he would steal from what was put into the common purse that he carried. So Judas, driven more by his self-serving greed than anything else, reprimanded Mary's self-less and extravagantly giving act. And, we are given a picture of two polar opposites - a woman who would give everything to her Lord and a man who when given the opportunity would take or steal whatever he could.

"Leave her alone", Jesus demanded. Jesus could see right through Judas and called him on his behavior. Who was he to pass judgement on Mary, in the way she honored Jesus and showed her love? In all the noise and activity that was happening around Jesus, Mary was the only one who specifically sought Jesus out and created a special moment where she not only could spend time with her Lord, but also serve and honor him in a humble way.

Yes, Jesus could see right through Judas. To be honest, Jesus could see a lot more of what was going on and what was to come, than any of his disciples. Jesus knew that the time was quickly coming when he'd no longer be with his disciples. Mary's act of using the nard, which is normally used for burials, was foreshadowing something that was soon to come. "She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial," Jesus said. With Jesus' arrival in Bethany, the general tension in the city was already high. Previously, when Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, though many people had come to believe because of that, others became upset and aggravated. They reported to the Pharisees what had happened, and the plot to kill Jesus was conceived. He could no longer walk out in the open by himself. He knew his days were numbered. "You always have the poor with you," Jesus said, "but you do not always have me." Jesus is alluding to his coming death. Aside from this, the passage is heavy with the notion of death already. The story began saying that it was 6

days before the Passover when they were in Lazarus' house. The Passover...which marks a time when God protected his people from the angel of death as it passed-over Egypt. Aside from the timing, death also enters our mind, when we consider whose house Jesus is visiting...the house of Lazarus...a man who for four days lay dead within a tomb until Jesus raised him.

So, yes, there is a feeling of impending death surrounding today's gospel. But, there is also life, hope and the distinct feeling that no matter what darkness may be pressing down around Jesus, God has things in hand and is at work through Jesus, doing something new....something unexpected. Yes, Jesus is in the home of Lazarus, a man who once was dead but not even death could hold him down when Jesus cried out to him "Lazarus, come out" and he walked out. Who is this Jesus who can call people back to life? Who is this man who has performed numerous miracles? Who is this man who can literally walk on water? Who is this man who when he speaks, it like God is speaking directly at us? Who is this man who has the Pharisees so worried, that they're plotting to kill him? You will not always have me, Jesus said. I think Mary, perhaps understood this and how incredibly special Jesus was and did not wait nor did she regret seizing that moment in Lazarus' house to honor Jesus and show him her love, no matter what the cost to her, while she had the chance. Her focus was on Jesus. What mattered to her the most was Jesus.

So, what does our reading of the Philippians have in common with our gospel lesson? In our reading from Philippians, Paul warns the church in Philippi about some so-called Christian missionaries, whom he calls dogs and evil workers, because they're leading people astray, peddling to any who will buy it supposedly better Christian credentials by offering to circumcise them. They were peddling the idea that to be a true or better Christian, you needed to be circumcised like the Jews. But Paul specifically warned against these missionaries saying "beware those who mutilate the flesh". (Philippians 3: 2b) In fact, he told the church in his letter "we are the circumcision", meaning that all who worship in the Spirit of God and follow Christ are already true Christians. The main point he was getting across in his letter was that these kinds of worldly and physical issues, whether it be circumcision or other issues that might divide the church, are not important and mean nothing. Paul could boast about having those type of sought after credentials, as a Jewish Christian, he was circumcised, descended from the tribe of Benjamin, the people of Israel, a Hebrew born of Hebrews. And yet, he said none of those things mattered...In fact, he called these worldly and physical things "rubbish". The only thing that mattered was knowing Christ Jesus as his Lord. "I want to know Christ", Paul said, "and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings". It seems like Paul too is looking for that intimate moment of

worship that Mary had with Jesus...For Paul, the only thing that mattered was Christ and the relationship he had with him...and that is what he tried to share in his letter to the church...do not get caught up in worldly things that do not matter...only Christ matters...Paul wants the church to look forward in faith and realize that what matters most is the new relationship they have with God in the person of Jesus Christ. He wants their focus to be on Christ, like Mary, to build their relationship with him.

So, I wonder? How is your relationship with Jesus? Are you like Martha or Lazarus, too occupied in the business of life to open their eyes to see and fully appreciate the fact that Christ is right there before them? Or has temptation perhaps led you astray, like Judas was led astray by money, too blind to see that his Savior, whom he should have valued most, was right there before him as well? Or are you like Mary or Paul, actively seeking and creating that special moment with Christ, worshipping and honoring him with all that is in you to give? Because that is what we have been called to do as Christians.

I hope that we will all seek or create moments like Mary to simply focus on Christ...to love, honor and worship him, no matter the cost, with all that is in us. And now, as we enter a moment of reflection, I ask you as fellow Christians to consider once more, "what matters the most to you"?

AMEN.

Prayer of Intercession:

Jesus - Like Mary poured her costly ointment on your feet and in her great love and humility cleaned your feet with her hair, Lord we kneel before you and offer to you our love, our hearts and our souls. As we continue on our Lenten journey, Lord we know that we are fast approaching your holy week...where every year we are reminded of your greatest gift to us...your self-less sacrifice...for us...people who are flawed and yet greatly loved by our Father in Heaven.

Help us, Jesus, to learn from your example and Mary's example of self-sacrifice, humility and love...may these be gifts that grow in our hearts and that we give freely to those who need it most. May we show your love to others as you have shown it to us.

Almighty God, though we may not always know it, you are doing something new...in this world and in our lives...even when we lose our way and get lost in our doubts and in darkness, you are the Almighty One...the Creator...who can change our lives within a moment...the one who calls us to stop looking at our past failures and start looking towards the future possibilities...to look forward in faith and trust that you are doing something new...within us...your light is shining within us so bright that it is bursting from us to light the world around us...your light cannot be contained...cannot be extinguished...it is our hope for a bright future because it comes from you. Lord, help us to stay strong in our faith.

As we live our lives, Lord, help us to recognize your hands at work in our lives, reshaping and renewing us, creating us anew for a future shaped by you. Lord, lead us, as we entrust our lives to you...that we may follow you to end of our days.

Jesus, many are reaching out for your healing hands. Many in this world need healing and a peace that only you can give... For those whose bodies or minds are failing, Lord, we pray for healing touch...For those whose hearts and spirits are broken Lord, we pray for your healing touch. For those who mourn the loss of loved ones, we pray for your healing peace. For those who have no one to pray or care for them, we pray for your healing presence. There is not one soul in this world Lord who cannot benefit from your love, care and forgiveness...Lord, we bring to you in silence all those we know of who could your healing at this time.

Into your hands, we place our lives and our hearts. Into your arms, we are held in love and forgiveness. And, we rejoice that you are a part of our lives. We rejoice in being your children. We rejoice that you are our God...now and always.

AMEN.