

April 3, 2022  
John 12:1-8

Lent 5  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## “True Disciples”

“Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.”

Liturgics was a required course for all first-year students at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. The class included lectures on the history and theology of the Lutheran liturgy as well as practical courses on how to lead worship services. After practising worship leadership for several weeks, our professor brought us into the seminary chapel to record us in various worship leadership roles, with the intention of watching and critiquing our leadership styles in later classes. I am sure that Dr. Hughes could not have imagined that this recording would become a video that would become famous across the campus, but what unfolded that day was truly a “comedy of errors.” It began when one of my classmates tripped while crossing the chancel from his seat to the altar and went flying like Superman. Another classmate broke out laughing during the benediction, while yet another greeted us with the words “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy *Saints* be with you all. My contribution to this fiasco was when I was taking my turn presiding at Holy Communion, with my classmate Rick serving in the assisting minister role. We were singing the liturgy, and when I began to sing the preface (“*It is indeed right, our duty and our joy ...*”) Rick lost his place and began singing the Sanctus (“*Holy, holy, holy ...*”) at the top of his lungs; my response was to gently tap Rick on the arm (something I do not remember doing) and then proceeded with the service. The highlight of this mishmash was when my roommate Martin took his turn as presiding minister. Martin had laryngitis that day but insisted on singing the presiding minister’s parts in the service. The result, to say the least, was memorable; we were laughing so hard that we were doubled over in the pews, not wanting to disrupt the service but also unable to control our laughter in what had clearly become a class that had gone “off the rails.”

The next week we watched the video, and the laughter continued as one disaster after another unfolded on the screen. At the end, Dr. Hughes turned off the tape player, looked at the class, and said one simple sentence: “That, my friends, is how you *do not* lead worship!” We learned through this experience that at times a negative experience can be as good as or better a teaching tool than a positive experience. We can learn a great deal from our failures, and we can also learn from those who are negative role models even as we learn much from positive role models.

In today's relatively short Gospel lesson, we have two examples of discipleship: a positive role model, and a negative example of how not to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. This story happens "*six days before the Passover [when] Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.*" (John 12:1). This locates the story on the Saturday before Holy Week, less than a week before Jesus' crucifixion on Good Friday. The identification of Bethany as the site of Jesus' raising of Lazarus directs the readers' attention toward Jesus' hour of suffering and death, because this miracle precipitated the death sentence under which Jesus now stands ("*Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who knew where Jesus was should let them know, so that they might arrest him.*" – 11:57). Jesus' return to Bethany, the place from which he had retreated in response to this death sentence ("*Jesus therefore no longer walked about openly ...*" – 11:54) also suggests movement toward the hour of his passion and death.

- "The reminder that Jesus had raised Lazarus looks backward to the miraculous sign and ahead to Jesus' death. The raising of Lazarus was a catalyst for the authorities' decision to seek his execution." – Francis Martin and William Wright.

As an honoured guest in their home, the family gives a dinner for Jesus: "*There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.*" (12:2). Outside of this verse, the word "dinner" (*deipnon*) is used exclusively in the Fourth Gospel to refer to Jesus' last dinner with his disciples ("*And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself.*" – 13:2-4). While there are echoes of Luke's account of Jesus' dinner with Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42), the main action here is when "*Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair.*" (12:3). Mary's anointing and wiping of Jesus' feet point toward Jesus' foot washing at the Last Supper ("*Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.*" – 13:5). The reference to the pervasiveness of the fragrance of the perfume ("*The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume*") signals the extravagance of Mary's act; it may also have additional significance in serving as a prophetic act that is both a sign of Jesus' kingship and its formal announcement. Anointing with oil or perfume had many purposes in the ancient world. For kings and queens, anointing meant consecration for a specific purpose ("*The Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed [David] in the presence of Iforward.*" – 1 Samuel 16:12). The sick were anointed as a ritual of healing ("*They cast out many demons, and*

*anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.*” – Mark 6:13) and the dead were anointed for burial (“*When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him.*” – Mark 16:1). Mary’s anointing also anticipates Nicodemus’ bringing a huge amount of ointment for Jesus’ burial (“*Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds.*” – 19:39). “Fragrance” often occurs in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, in reference to the odour of liturgical sacrifices offered to God (“*After taking it from a handful of the choice flour and oil, with all its frankincense, the priest shall turn this token portion into smoke on the altar, an offering by fire of pleasing odour to the LORD.*” – Leviticus 2:2). The fragrance of the oil may anticipate Jesus’ sacrificial gift of his own life on the Cross: “*the stench of death that lingered over the household has been replaced by the fragrance of love and devotion.*” (Gail O’Day).

While Mary expresses her love and devotion to Jesus through the extravagance of her gift and her act of anointing his feet and drying them with her hair, Judas has a very different reaction to this incident: “*But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples ... said, ‘Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?’*” (12:4-5). While on the surface Judas’ concern may appear reasonable, especially to anyone who has lived on a tight budget and is concerned about extravagant spending, John’s comments point to the hypocrisy behind Judas’ words. He identifies Judas as “*the one who was about to betray him*” and adds that “*he said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.*” (12:6). The reference to his betrayal delegitimizes Judas’ protest before he even speaks. What might be a about a year’s wages) is shown to be untrustworthy. The delegitimizing of Judas continues with John’s comment that Judas was keeper of the common purse and that his greed was the reason for his treachery. Judas is labelled a “thief” (*kleptes*), the same word used to describe the one who threatens in the flock in Jesus’ revelation of himself as the Good Shepherd (“*Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit.*” – 10:1). The expression “*not because he cared about the poor*” echoes the description of the hired hand’s lack of care for the sheep (“*The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.*” – 10:13). When Judas betrays Jesus, he also betrays the sheep. The comments that Judas would betray Jesus and held the money bag look ahead to the Last Supper, where mention is made of Judas being the group’s treasurer when he leaves to betray Jesus:

- “Jesus said to him, ‘Do quickly what you are going to do.’ Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, ‘But what we need for the festival’; or, that he should give something to the poor.” – 13:27-29).

Jesus’ response to Judas is an emphatic command: “*Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.*” (12:7). While the grammar in this sentence is awkward, it indicates that while Jesus will not be buried for another week, “the day of Jesus burial” has begun. Jesus has been pointing to the time of “his hour” throughout the Gospel (“*Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.*” – 2:4); the significance of Mary’s act is that it anticipates the final anointing after Jesus’ death. “*In John, Jesus’ hour is the time of his death and exaltation, and both these are prefigured in Mary’s anointing of Jesus.*” (Susan Hulen).

Jesus’ final words in this scene, that “*you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me*” (12:8) allude to the commandment to care for the poor in the Torah: “*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.’*” (Deuteronomy 15:11). It reminds the disciples of the limited time of Jesus’ presence among them and the urgency to respond to Jesus while he is still here. Mary has recognized this limitedness and responded to it.

- “In Mary, then, the reader is given a picture of the fullness of the life of discipleship. Her act shows forth the love that will be the hallmark of discipleship in John and the recognition of Jesus’ identity that is the decisive mark of Christian life.” – O’Day.

As Mary is identified by Jesus as a true example of discipleship, Martha’s actions also embody Jesus’ teachings about his followers. While mention of her in this lesson is brief (“*Martha served ...*”), her actions take on a new meaning when reflected in Jesus’ teachings; Jesus will point to service (*diakoneo*) as a central aspect of discipleship: “*Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour*” (12:26). While Martha’s consciousness of her actions is not known, she is shown to be doing what Jesus expects of his disciples.

While the sisters’ intentions are unknown, Judas’ secret motivations are made known to the reader. His concern for the poor is merely a ruse to cover his own greed; while

he is one of the Twelve, his actions show that he is not an example of true discipleship, which means following the one who came “*not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.*” (Mark 10:45). While Martha and Mary freely give to the one they follow as Lord and Saviour, Judas uses his position as one of Jesus’ closest followers as a means to enrich himself; for Judas, being in charge of the common purse is an opportunity for him to fulfill his own will and desires, rather than walking in obedience to the one who taught us to pray “*thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*” In Martha and Mary, we have positive example of how we can be true disciples of our Lord; in Judas, we have an example of how *not* to be a disciple.

While negative examples can serve as a valuable teaching tool in our formation as disciples of Christ, our call as Christians is to strive to be true disciples, to be faithful to our call to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love our neighbours as ourselves. In Holy Baptism, we receive a candle along with the word of our Lord Jesus Christ to “*let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*” (Matthew 5:16). In affirming our baptismal promises at Confirmation, we profess our intention to “*continue in the covenant God made with you in holy baptism: to live among God’s faithful people, to hear the word of God and share in the Lord’s supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive to justice and peace in all the earth*” (ELW Affirmation of Baptism). As we depart from worship, we are charged to “*go in peace; serve the Lord,*” understanding that our lives as disciples of Christ are lived both within the assembly of God’s people and in the world in which we live and serve every day.

- “Sending is a time for again recalling our baptism; this time for taking our baptismal calling with us into our daily vocation. It is a time for sending and being sent; a time to thank God for the gifts of this assembly and prepare to extend them into the community. It is a time to gather up the gifts of bread and wine so that they can be sent to those who were absent that day; a final time to thank God for those gifts.” – Lorraine Brugh and Gordon Lathrop, *The Sunday Assembly*.

All of us are role models. Our call is to strive to be positive role models like Martha and Mary, not negative role models like Judas. While we can learn from the negative example of those who use their position for their own selfish gain, whose outward appearance masks their evil intentions, we must continue to strive to be positive role

models, witnessing to the love of God in Christ Jesus by both our words and our deeds. While I have made numerous mistakes over the years in leading worship (most, thankfully, have not been caught on tape!), I have always strived to be faithful to my call as a minister of Word and Sacrament; it remains my prayer every Sunday that *“the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.”* (Psalm 19:14). May it be our prayer that we as God’s people in this place strive to be true examples of discipleship, so that in all our words and deeds others may experience the love of God and know that in this world of darkness there is that life which is the life for all people; may we shine Christ’s light before others so that they too might desire to join us in walking as children of the light, as true servants of our Lord who gave of himself on the Cross so that all may know the love of God that is ours in the one anointed by Mary in preparation for his death and resurrection and the promise that *“if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”* (Romans 6:5).

Amen.