

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC  
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What Would You Give?  
Isaiah 43:16-21, John 12:1-11

The story of the woman who anoints Jesus with oil is one of the few stories that appears in all four of the Gospels. We compared these stories in our adult studies class this week. We found the stories in Mark and Matthew are almost exactly the same, but the woman has no name. The story in John is similar, but Jesus is found at the home of Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary. Mary is the woman who anoints Jesus. The story in Luke is perhaps the most different. In Luke, the story ends with Jesus forgiving the sins of the woman. The other three Gospels end with Jesus saying the woman has anointed him in preparation for burial.

But there is one particular similarity. In each story, the woman brings something priceless to give; expensive oil in an alabaster jar; luxuries worth more than 300 denarii- a year's wages for a worker. Where did the woman get this wealth? And why has she given it to Jesus?

Because of the way Judas reacts- we could have sold the oil and given it to the poor- we might guess that other people have brought gifts to Jesus and the disciples. Perhaps people brought gifts out of what they had- money, oil, food, cloth. From what we know of Jesus, he had no wealth and neither did his disciples.

Neither did most of the people they ministered to. They were the marginalized of the society- the poor, the widow, the orphan, the physically and mentally disabled. We can imagine that if they brought gifts, they were brought from what little they had to support and even feed their families. Why would they bring gifts at all, much less priceless gifts?

From what we know, Jesus was an itinerant Rabbi with no home or other vocation to support him. People might have brought him gifts to support his teaching, preaching and healing ministry. We know that the culture also prized hospitality, and washing and anointing the feet of a guest would have shown respect and honor. Some people even thought he might be the Messiah- one who would free them from their captivity, either political, social/economic or spiritual. Bringing a gift to someone so important is not surprising.

But bringing something worth a year's wages, a priceless gift, without expecting some benefit in return seems extraordinary. Take a moment to imagine yourself in the place of Mary. What would you bring if you met Jesus, the Christ?

Hold on to that image for a moment while I tell you two stories.

The first is about a pastor friend. She and I were confused by the fact that the members of her congregation ask (read expect) her to attend funerals of people she does not know, and who have never attended the church. She has no official role in the funeral and it takes up time she could be visiting or ministering to the

congregation. The deceased have never attended her church, in fact, they attend another church in her denomination. But they have faithfully supported the church financially. On the surface, her attendance at the funerals may seem to be a simple matter of courtesy.

But if we examine it more closely, there is a deeper meaning to this situation. Although they have never received any benefit, the people have given their gift faithfully, some for over 50 years. The church has changed: members of the congregation have changed over, the pastor has changed many times, and the ministries of the church have even changed completely. Why do they give? What would you give?

When she and I talked about it, we realized that even though her church is an old church, in an old town, in the United States, my friend serves a “mission church,” and she is a missionary. She goes to the funerals to honor the faithfulness of the supporters of that mission. Like Mary, they give with no expectation of benefit to themselves. Their gifts are given to serve God’s purpose in that place, to continue Jesus’ ministry, even over the changes in time. What would you give?

The second story is about a visit I made to a church. The pastor said hello in passing, and an usher seated me. After worship, I introduced myself to the woman sitting next to me. She said hello and left me to go to the fellowship time. I introduced myself and talked to and offered to assist a woman in a wheelchair to

the fellowship hall. But she said she would rather wait for her son. I stopped to look at flyers about the church programs to see if I could volunteer, but soon found myself alone.

So, I went and found the reception hall. There was a line and I got in it. When I introduced myself to the man behind me in line he said hello. When I said hello to the people serving the food they hurried off to fill trays. I found the chairs at all the tables full. No one made room for me or invited me to sit with them.

I found a seat at the table where there were five children (all under 6). I talked to them but they soon ran off to play. A mother came to clean up after them. She said hello and left.

I ate my food and took my trash to the trashcan. A man cleaning up said thank you. I found the pastor surrounded by church members. I waited and introduced myself. We spoke for a couple of minutes, but then someone interrupted us. I introduced myself to the people around the pastor. They said hello, but then began talking to each other.

I decided to go home. On the way out, the man I had met at the trashcan caught up to me. He apologized for not introducing himself and welcoming me. He thanked me for coming and invited me to come again. What would you give?

Now I ask you again to consider, what would you give if you met Jesus, the Christ? Got the image in your mind?

What my two stories have in common with our gospel story is that people give themselves. Mary brought oil and wiped Jesus' feet with her hair; an expensive gift of honor, given in an extremely intimate way, a gift of herself, with no conceivable benefit to her. Jesus recognized what her gift truly meant. When Judas tried to chastise her, Jesus says, "leave her alone." Jesus received and accepted her gift, and her, completely.

Support is given to my friend's church without any benefit to the giver. The pastor goes to the funerals to honor and represent the ministry of Jesus that continues through their gift. Her presence symbolizes receiving and accepting their gift, and them, completely.

When I visited that church, I tried to give my gift. Finally, just before I left, a man realized that I had not been received and accepted. I was about to take my gift with me. He apologized for not introducing himself and welcoming me. He thanked me for coming and invited me back. I finally felt received and accepted.

What would you give? What would you give if you met Jesus, the Christ? I think we might all agree with Mary, no matter what we bring, the only truly acceptable gift is our selves.

Wherever we go, we bring our selves. Our act of showing up is a gift of our self and the people we meet also give themselves. It is the most priceless gift we have. They and we need to feel received and accepted. Jesus knew this and acted

in a way that mirrors the way God feels about us. He mirrored the way that we should feel about each other as well.

In our other scripture reading today, Isaiah speaks for God, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” Palm Sunday is coming. What happens if we have visitors next week? Or the week after? What would you give to show they are received and accepted?

Isaiah speaks for God, “I am about to do a new thing...” Hillcrest, like all churches is “mission church.” The gifts we give are to serve God’s purpose in this place, to continue Jesus’ ministry, even over the changes in time. What would you give with no expectation of benefit to your self?

Isaiah speaks for God, “I am about to do a new thing...” Your life is a gift from God, what would you give to see that it is used for the glory of God?