

## ***Good Intentions, Poor Actions?***

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John 12:1-8

*“You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”*

### *Movement 1 – Surface Views*

“You can’t judge a book by its cover.” This is a proverb that is often invoked and used to direct individual’s values and judgments. You can’t judge something based only on its face value. You must always dig deeper, try to find out more before you reach any conclusions. Don’t take what people say literally, don’t see things in simplistic ways, and look below the surface.

If someone says, “take a hike,” we know that they don’t literally mean we need to take a hike. If someone asks you to “hold down the fort” we know they don’t literally mean to “hold down the fort” especially if you don’t live in a fort. The idioms of the English language are just one example of how we don’t take things literally. We know that there is something deeper, a meaning behind the words themselves that we need to hear. Life is full of moments that we cannot take literally. Life is full of complexities, of nuances and details that one cannot find with an initial, surface, literal reading.

Yet there are those who approach the world with a literal point of view. There are those who take what they see as the complete picture. For example, there is a children’s book about a maid named Amelia Buddleia who constantly runs into problems because she takes everyone literally. Amelia was told to change the towels, so she cut them into different shapes than they were originally – she changed the towels. Amelia was told to draw the drapes, so she took a piece of paper and drew a picture of the drapes. Amelia would again and again misinterpret, misunderstand, and take things very literally. At the end of every book she seemed to get out of trouble by baking something that tasted very good (cookies, pie, etc.). Amelia was someone that took things literally.

At times the disciples took the words and teachings of Jesus literally. In the Gospel of Matthew, just after feeding the five thousand, and then feeding another multitude, Jesus says to the disciples, “beware the yeast of the Pharisees,” and the disciples wonder if Jesus is saying that because they do not have any bread (Matthew 16)! They are missing the deeper point that Jesus is pushing and thinking only of the surface, the obvious ideas. They were taking things literally.

There are those who only see the cover of the book. There are those who only see the surface, the immediate impression and make their judgments from that impression. There are those who do not look below the surface. Most of us know better than to rush to judgment. Most of us know better than to jump to conclusions. We know to look below the surface and not take things literally.

### *Movement 2 – The Wasteful Woman*

There is a danger of reading this scripture passage literally. It is a passage that pulls us to one reading, to one level, to one understanding of what is happening. It is a reading where Mary’s actions seem wasteful and foolish. In the scripture reading today, in the gospel of John, we witness Mary performing a ritual, and we are pulled to a literal reading of that ritual. We see Mary taking a large amount of perfume costing a considerable amount of money – perhaps as much as one month’s salary, and pouring the perfume over Jesus’ feet. We can smell the fragrance of the perfume filling the room, strong and sweet. Then we witness Mary proceeding to wipe Jesus’ feet with her hair, tenderly and carefully cleaning them. Are you sharing the shock and the dismay of the disciples as the fragrance of the perfume fills the room? The smell of the perfume is acting as an offensive reminder of Mary’s actions; pulling them back and back again to Mary’s shocking display in front of everyone. This was an action that was out of the ordinary that went beyond the lines and the expectations of

culture. It was normal for the host to wash a guest's feet with water, just as Jesus did that fateful night before he was crucified, at his final meal. It was normal to take a towel and dry off the guest's feet, but to use a costly perfume, and for a woman to use her hair to dry off the guest's feet crossed a number of social boundaries and morays. What Mary was doing was provocative. She was being more intimate than appropriate in a public setting. She was performing the ritual that one performs for the dead. These actions were shocking, unexpected and offensive.

Perhaps some of the disciples squirmed in their seats at this provocative display of affection and intimacy. Perhaps others squirmed nervously as they watched Mary break the seal of the perfume and pour all of the contents of the bottle onto Jesus' feet. Judas speaks up, but perhaps some of the other disciples are murmuring a similar discontent that Judas articulates. They saw a large amount of money wasted, they saw a woman acting inappropriately, and the smell of the perfume would constantly remind them of Mary's offensive actions. These were wasteful actions. There were irresponsible actions that called to be challenged. How else could one look at Mary's display of affection? How else could one read Mary's affront to all that was sensible and proper?

It would be as if a couple was showing a great display of affection in front of everyone else. Or if someone proposed in public – this is an amount of affection that doesn't feel right or appropriate. Yet Mary's actions went one step further. It would be like purchasing someone a casket and presenting it as a gift before he or she were dead. That would be a lot of money on something that was not needed. It would be as if someone sent funeral flowers to dinner party for one particular guest. This morbid sign of affection crosses social boundaries and is seen as sick and inappropriate. One of the main characters in the movie *Harold and Maud* was someone who enjoyed going to funerals, faking his own death, and driving around a hearse. He didn't fit in with the rest of society because he crossed what were considered acceptable boundaries. It was those kinds of boundaries that Mary crossed and more. For Mary spent a large amount of money in her actions. Like taking your bonus and spending it on material things, or someone receiving a large amount of money and spending it lavishly, not putting it away. Think of the large six million dollar homes. These are things that many would consider to be wasteful and maybe we can hear ourselves saying, "This money could have been spent on the poor." I think of the pastors who live in million dollar homes, who fly in Lear Jets, and who live rich lifestyle. Such a lifestyle seems to be country to the life that Jesus calls us to live. There was a time when I was in Montreal with a friend of mine, and we went to the cathedral. The cathedral there is a scale replica of Notre Dame (just a little smaller). It is an incredible structure. When we went in I was marveling at the windows, the woodwork, the floors, and all the glory of the building, and my friend said, "Think of all the resources that could have gone to the poor." His words brought shame to my heart for marveling and lifting up such a structure. His words made me wonder if Jesus would say the same thing about such buildings of glory. I can understand the reaction of Judas. I can imagine the reaction of the disciples, for on the surface, and from many other angles, it seems that Mary's actions were foolish, offensive and wasteful.

### *Movement 3 – Pious Indignation*

So in a way we can relate to Judas' indignation. We all understand that Judas had different motives; we understand that Judas was acting out of greed and that Judas had more sinister, alternative motives for his criticism, yet we can relate to Judas' criticism if we read Mary's actions from only one level. If we just look at what Mary was doing, and draw our own conclusions, than we can agree with a kind of pious indignation. We may say, her intentions were in the right place, it was only her actions that were misguided. We may go so far to judge and criticize claiming that such an amount of money could be useful and helpful for the cause. We can claim that such an amount of money should be used for the poor or another cause, not a self-serving display of affection that leads to nothing but a broken bottle and nice smelling feet. It is a kind of pious indignation that

leads to such criticism. It is a sense of moral superiority that can lead us to a place where we quickly criticize and condemn the seemingly wasteful and foolish actions of Mary.

This is the kind of indignation that leads parents and grandparents to judge and criticize the actions of youth. Some look at the clothing, hear the music, we observe the actions and the surface values of the many young people today, and assume that it is to revealing, disrespectful, loud, and brash. A surface reading, an initial experience immediately leads to a criticism, just as has happened from generation to generation. I find consolation in the hope and idea that some day the youth of today will be criticizing the music, clothing, and attitudes of the younger generation as well. Yet if we all took time to listen, to ask, to learn more, we would find out that the clothing, the music, and the attitudes of each generation reflect experiences, anguishes and an ethos of a generation. Countless works have told us what the culture of the sixties was about. In the book *Virtual Faith*, Tom Boudein writes about the Gen X movement, the clothing and the music in an effort to counter the criticism and the judgment of many of the older generation. He explains that this is a generation that was raised with a high percent of divorce in homes, and the constant threat of a nuclear holocaust and from these experiences, and others, come the styles, the music, and the attitudes of that particular generation. We can judge without understanding, or we can try to learn about and get to know a generation before drawing any conclusions.

Yet it is so much easier to just jump to conclusions and criticize. It is so much easier to condemn rather than getting to know what is actually going on. Those of you who claim to be a Baptist, how many times have you been pushed into a stereotype just because you have claimed to be Baptist? How many times have you been judged without any deeper information?

We all, at one time or another, find ourselves judging what is different, judging what is not what we find as the norm, judging what we do not understand with a pious indignation. We find ourselves, at one time or another, looking at the surface, looking at only what we want to see. Battles over worship emerge because individuals find themselves in their own camps, bunkering down with their hymns, their prayers, and their style of preaching. Individuals judge other kinds of worship because it is not what they are used to and seldom try to understand the experience of other people. Groups of people are classified and judged based on a surface view, and never is there an attempt to try to understand the group itself.

When I went to Mexico with a youth group some of us built a second story on the church, while others spend time with the children of the neighborhood running a VBS. Those who worked on the roof looked at the VBS people with a kind of indignation, asking to see the productivity, and the results of their work. They felt that building something was more important than just playing games with children. Those who spent time with the VBS program were criticized for wasting the money that it cost to attend this trip, they were looked down upon for missing the real purpose of the trip. They were told that their intentions were good but their actions were misled. Yet the relationships built with the children, the actions shared with the children built a foundation that will last longer than anything built with hammer and nails. A deeper understanding was needed.

We all fall into that place of judging, of criticizing, and of condemning based on what we see and what is happening. We are a part of a cultural indignation of surface judging and piety. We observe and we judge and we can relate with Judas's criticisms as we watch Mary's actions.

#### *Movement 4 – The Thoughtful Woman*

Yet there is more going on than what we can see. There is more than just a waste of costly perfume and Jesus' denial of the poor. There is more going on than what we can see. The scholar Thomas Long makes the point that throughout the Gospel of John one finds what he calls a "double tape" a surface meaning and a deeper meaning. Other scholars remind us that the gospel of John is constantly calling individuals to see and believe, but there is always something deeper than what one can only see on the surface. The gospel is replete with

symbols and metaphors, and we are challenged to stop in our initial criticism. We are called to hold off our indignation and look for the deeper meaning and the deeper action.

Think of the spirituals that come from the African American slave experience. These were songs that sung of Moses, and heaven and of hope, yet they also had a deeper, a double meaning. The song sung today, *Wade in the Water* gives suggestions and instructions for slaves to escape the plantation via the river. The song *Follow the Drinking Gourd* suggested to the slaves that they follow the Big Dipper in route to the north. There was a deeper, a coded message in the spirituals. They spoke of late night gatherings, of the path to follow for the Underground Railroad, and of a very real freedom that could be obtained. They had a deeper meaning.

We are called to look to the bigger picture, the deeper meaning before jumping to the criticism of righteous indignation. Before judging the actions and the intentions of Mary, let's look to the reasons that many have prompted Mary's actions.

Mary saw a deeper meaning of Jesus' meal. She saw beneath the tired mask that Jesus was wearing to the profound suffering that Jesus was already enduring as he was preparing for his final journey. Maybe Mary knew that in six more days Jesus would be tried and crucified. Maybe Mary knew that the next trip from Bethany to Jerusalem would be Jesus' last. Maybe Mary saw beneath the surface meal and wanted to address the deeper event. This meal was more than a simple meal. This was a meal to prepare the lamb for Passover; this was a meal to prepare Christ for his final week and his sacrifice.

Mary's actions connect with the deeper meaning of the meal. She sees Christ as the king and anoints him just as a king should be anointed. Yet she also sees Christ as the lamb to be sacrificed and anoints his feet, as if fitting to do for a funeral. She anointed Jesus' feet with perfume and proclaimed his glory that will come through his death. The act that one performs on the dead, Mary performs on Christ while he is still alive. It is as if Mary is trying to connect with Christ's anguish. It is as if Mary is trying to give a sense of ease to the anxiety of Jesus with her anointing. Mary is participating in the sacred moment, and while from the surface, her actions do not make sense, there is more going on with Mary's actions than just a wasteful show of affection. There is more going on with Mary's actions than just an impulsive and foolish move. There is more going on than what we can see.

#### *Movement 5 – Embracing the Suffering*

Mary is naming and embracing the suffering of Jesus. Mary is naming the suffering that Jesus is going to endure and taking a part of that suffering. Mary is claiming the death that Jesus is going to endure and is preparing Jesus for that death. Mary is naming and embracing the suffering of Jesus.

The other disciples are there for the meal and are oblivious to any deeper meaning. The other disciples are just taking part in the moment, lavishing the limelight of the resurrected Lazarus and enjoying the notoriety of being a follower of Jesus. The other disciples are only seeing the surface. Yet Mary is embracing the true nature of the meal, a preparation for the final meal with Christ. Mary is naming and claiming the suffering that Jesus is going to endure.

Think if you are praying for someone who is sick, and you start of saying, "God help my friend who is ill." But then you start to imagine what your friend is going through. You start to wonder what it might be like to spend day and night in a hospital alone and scared. You start to imagine the pain your friend is enduring constantly. You imagine the loneliness your friend is feeling with an absence of family. You start to imagine what it might be like for your friend, and your prayer takes a deeper, a more profound turn. You no longer just pray that God be with your friend, but you begin to cry for your friend. You let your tears fall, and you let your tears be your prayer. In your prayer you embrace your friend's suffering. And then, when you visit your friend in the hospital, gone is the surface banter, gone is the conversation about hospital food and the friendliness of the nursing staff. Instead, you anoint your friend with your prayers, you wash your friend with your tears, and you sit with your friend in the anguish and the hurt.

It is trying to imagine what it might be like to walk in someone's shoes, but at a profound and spiritual level. It is trying to imagine what it might be like to live like the other person; to empathize and understand.

In college, some of the students would spend a week sleeping in boxes to try to imagine what it might be like to be homeless. Some youth fast for a day to begin to understand what it is like to go hungry. These are good steps to understand the poor, yet I would challenge you, before you go and serve the poor, to spend time in prayer. Spend as much time as you need to be at a place where you can anoint the poor with your prayers. Imagine what it must be like to be a single mother working a low paying job and trying to raise children. Imagine what it might be like to be a veteran who cannot hold down a job after seeing combat. Imagine what it might be like to be struggling every week to earn enough money to make ends meet. Let your imagination embrace the suffering of the poor and then after praying, you will be ready, not to just serve the poor but to be with the poor. Some may look and scoff and criticize what may look like a waste of time. Some may say that the poor needs help and needs help now. But the time you spend in prayer will help you focus, will help you hear the call of God in your actions. Your time in prayer will help you to see the bigger picture of the homeless, of the poor and of the suffering. Your time in prayer will be your step to embrace the suffering.

Follow Mary's example and embrace the suffering of others, learn about the suffering of others, and then let your intentions lead your actions. Then, as you embrace the suffering of others, you will have good intentions and good actions.

#### *Movement 6 – Embracing the Cross*

Let us most importantly embrace the suffering of the cross. Let us embrace the suffering that Jesus is preparing to endure. Next week we are going to journey from Bethany to Jerusalem, and we will proclaim Christ as King with waving of palms and the shouting of hosannas. It will be a triumphant day, but that journey will be the beginning of the end leading to Christ's death. Are you ready to walk with Christ into the garden, to the trial, and then up the hill to the cross? Are you ready to watch and witness Christ's suffering? Embrace it today. Pour our heart, like perfume over Christ, giving yourself to Christ, committing yourself to walk with Christ all the way up that craggy road, through the pain and the suffering. I am calling you to commit to stay with Christ through all of the pain and all of the suffering. In a way that can only glorify our Lord, pour your spirit onto Christ, promising to stay with Christ through to the end. You may have already tasted the cross, you may have already smelled its pain. When you empathize with the suffering of the sick, you are beginning to embrace the cross. When you empathize with the suffering of the poor, you are beginning to embrace the cross. When you empathize with the suffering of the oppressed, then you are beginning to embrace the cross. Yet as we move towards Holy Week and Easter, I am calling you to suspend your desire to sit with the poor and sit with Christ. For now, suspend your drive to offer mercy to the marginalized and sit with Christ. For in sitting and walking and suffering, you will be forming the foundation upon which you can serve the poor, work with oppressed, and sit with the suffering. Only when you embrace the suffering of Christ will you be able to embrace the suffering of others. We are called to embrace the suffering of the Lord, to embrace the cross.

Are you ready to embrace the cross? For in the suffering of the cross, Christ takes on the suffering of the world. Embrace the suffering of the cross; walk closely with Jesus to the end that will be beaten, to the death that will not stay. Do not watch the events from afar, but always at Christ's side. This is different for asking Christ to walk with you in your difficult times. Instead you are asking for the strength and the courage to walk with Christ in his difficult times.

Are you ready, for next week Christ begins his final journey? Are you ready, for next week, Christ heads to cross? Take that costly time to pray. Take that costly time to pray with others. Take that valuable energy and spend it on Christ and prepare to embrace the suffering of the cross and the suffering of the world.

And then ask to for a close, a closer walk with Christ into garden. Take a closer walk with Christ to the cross. Ask for the strength and the courage to stay with Christ. For that close, that close walk with him. Into the suffering and the anguish, walk with Christ to the end and to the glory of the Lord.

AMEN