

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

A Thousand Words Worth of Pictures

(John 12:1-11)

Introduction: The power of the picture ...

Blockbuster and Netflix have tapped into our love of story and have shipped billions of movies, both in the mail and through the cloud.

At the end of a long week, many of us enjoy sliding a disk into our DVD/ Blue Ray player or streaming to watch a mystery, drama, action or funny movie. A good story can hold us spellbound for a couple of hours.

By contrast, a snapshot, well, it's just a picture. Boring. No action.

Really?

I think that, while a movie is exciting, a still photo can pack quite a punch.

Think of the many pictures you have seen - famous ones and personal ones - that bring stories to your mind.

In 1980 it was the image of a jubilant USA hockey team that had just defeated the heavily favored Soviet team in the Olympics that swelled national pride in a season of despair.

It was snapshots of the dismantling of the Berlin Wall in November of 1989 that prompted tears of joy to flow throughout the free world.

In 2001, it was still images that haunted us as the World Trade Center's Twin Towers came down.

In more recent days, who of us can get out of our brain the still images of Japan's recent earthquake and the resulting tsunami disasters?

In my study here at church I display a few pictures on top of a credenza. The pictures all tell stories. I can look at those pictures, and a thousand words come to mind.

Every once in a while, I'll pull down a photo album at home and sit down to look at the pictures. I've even got pictures on my computer and will look at electronic pics of family vacations or backpacking trips. The pictures each tell a story, evoke a memory. I get lost in reverie for a few minutes looking at these pictures.

The power of the still photo, the snapshot, lies in its ability to stimulate the imagination.

In our time in God's Word today, we are not going to a movie theatre, but we are going to see some pictures. We're opening up a photo album that records images from a couple of events that occurred just a few days before Jesus' death.

As we view them we'll find that, like many still pictures, they not only tell stories, they invite soul-searching questions.

As we open the photo album, we find ourselves at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, in the small town of Bethany. Bethany was a village located just a few miles away from Jerusalem. The camera clicks on a happy domestic scene.

Inside the Home of Good Friends (vv. 1-8)

Pic #1: A Meal in Honor of Jesus (vv. 1-2)

[1] Jesus, therefore, six days before the Passover, came to Bethany where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. [2] So they made Him a supper there, and Martha was serving; but Lazarus was one of those reclining at the table with Him.

A few days earlier Jesus had been in the hill country area to the north of Judea.¹ Now, for the last time, He has traveled south and has entered the region of Judea and is going to go to Jerusalem.

Jesus has come to the home of three good friends for a friendly visit and a good, hot, home-cooked meal.

John tells us that this meal and this time of fellowship takes place six days prior to Passover, Passover being one of the three great feasts on the Jewish calendar. Passover is a celebration of the deliverance of the Jews from Egyptian bondage during the time of Moses, about fifteen hundred years before Jesus was born.²

We know from elsewhere in the New Testament that Passover occurred on the Sabbath (sunset on Friday until sunset on Saturday) on this particular year. So, six days out from Passover means that Jesus' time with Mary, Martha and Lazarus took place late on the Saturday afternoon of the week before His crucifixion.

Jesus would have been a very welcome guest in this home. Not long before this He had raised Lazarus from the dead. So it might not be a bad guess to suggest that this was a meal thrown in Jesus' honor to say, "Thanks!"

At this meal would have been at least Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and Jesus, plus the twelve disciples. All of this means that these three siblings must have had a pretty good-sized home, and were evidently people of means. We'll see more evidence that this family was wealthy in just a minute.

¹ See John 11:54-57. He was in the ancient land of the tribe of Ephraim.

² The Passover observance included a special meal served up by every Jewish family. The main course of that meal was roast lamb. On that first Passover during Moses' time, the lambs were sacrificed, and their blood was sprinkled on the door posts of each home. The blood was a sign to keep the death angel from destroying their first born son, as he had destroyed the first born male child in each Egyptian home. The Jews understood then, and in Jesus' day, that the Lamb protected them from the wrath of God.

Martha was serving. We're not surprised and we don't think ill of her for serving. One time, Jesus did gently chide her for being so concerned about relatively minor things in the face of eternal things.

But now there is no reproof. Somebody had to serve and Martha was more than glad to serve Jesus.

We've got that snapshot in our mind. It is a delightful gathering. All are having a great time. Martha is serving. The next picture brings Martha's sister, Mary, into view.

Pic #2: Mary Anoints Jesus (v. 3)³

In this home the family had some perfume called *nard*. Nard (sometimes referred to as *spikenard*) is a fragrance that is still in use today. It is made from a plant that grows in the foothills of the Himalayan Mountains of northern India, China, and Nepal.

The part of the plant that contains the essential oil for the perfume "nard" is under the ground, a part of the root system. In the ancient world it was difficult to obtain and was very, very expensive.

For long distance transport, it was packed and sealed in alabaster⁴ jars. Nard would have been a highly prized fragrance in any home, and the presence of nard indicates this family's wealth and.

Watch what Mary does.

[3] Mary then took a pound of very costly perfume of pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

As the verse says, this anointing was very costly. It was an extravagant, over the top act of worship.

³ There are other anointing incidents recorded in the Gospels. In Luke 7, Jesus was anointed by a sinful woman in the home of Simon the Pharisee, presumably in the region of Galilee. Another time, Matthew records that Jesus was in the home of Simon the Leper (in Bethany), also near the time of His death.

⁴ Alabaster vases were popularly used to store perfumes.

Extravagance is seen in every aspect of Mary's act.

She used waaaaay more perfume than was necessary to anoint Jesus. A small drop would have been plenty. And something far less expensive would have worked. Olive oil was often used for anointing and blessings. But Mary poured out all of the nard in the bottle (the Bible says "*a pound*"). Can you just imagine how the place would have smelled after she did this?

Extravagance is way the anointing was accomplished. A clean linen rag or a natural sponge would customarily be used for such an act. Not for this anointing. No, Mary used her hair. In that day, a respectable woman never let her hair down in public. But Mary was so overcome with devotion for Jesus that thoughts of propriety and decorum fled.

Finally, the object of the anointing said, "*over the top*" too. In Old Testament times, the kings' head was often anointed. Oil would flow down through his beard. But Mary anointed Jesus' feet. And that says something about her own sense of awe in the presence of Jesus.

Every aspect of this anointing speaks of Mary's recognition that Jesus is worthy of her whole-hearted worship.

One word we might use to describe the anointing is "costly" - and using up all the nard in the home was certainly costly for her and her sister Martha and her brother Lazarus!

But "sacrificial" works, too. Sacrificial, costly acts of worship are found throughout the Bible.⁵

For instance,

- Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac, on the altar to God cost the ultimate price.

⁵ See 2 Samuel 24:18-25 for a wonderful statement from King David. He will not offer to God a burnt offering to God which cost him nothing, but will buy the threshing floor on which the sacrifice will be made from a man named Araunah. David understood that God delights in our giving to Him offerings that are, in our currency, costly.

- David's exuberant dancing before the Lord when the ark of the covenant came into the city of Jerusalem was extravagant;
- The countless thousands of animals sacrificed to God at the dedication of Solomon's Temple was outrageously expensive.

What we see is that Mary's act is not unique. It is in line with how worship has always been carried out by the people of God. Worship - true worship - is giving gifts worthy of God. It is declaring God's "worth-ship."

We applaud Mary's sacrificial worship. She shows us what worship is all about.

But, the point-and-shoot camera tilts away from Mary and Jesus to one person in the room who was not applauding. John clicks on the face of Judas Iscariot and catches him in a scowl. He - alone out of everyone else in the room - considered Mary's anointing of Jesus to be a waste.

What's funny is that as we listen to Judas' objection, we're tempted to think, "*You know, he's got a point.*"

Pic #3 Judas Scowls at Mary's Act (vv. 4-6)

What an honorable guy! (vv. 4-5)

[4] But Judas Iscariot, one of His disciples, who was intending to betray Him, said, [5] "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to poor people?"⁶

Listen to his words and it sounds like he's concerned for the poor. Three hundred denarii was equal to a working man's wages for about a full year. You could feed a family of four for quite a while if you just sold the perfume.

After that comment, Judas comes out smelling like a rose, more fragrant than the perfume. It appears that Judas is the only compassionate one of the bunch. He's the only one who really cares for the poor.

⁶ The dual reference to Judas as "disciple" and "betrayor" is intentional and telling.

I've wondered this week if Judas' comment was actually a rebuke of Mary's anointing. And if it is, who is he rebuking? Mary, for wastefully anointing Jesus? Or Jesus, for accepting the wasteful anointing?!

It looks for all the world like Judas is more Christian than Jesus!

Now, if this comment was all we had of Judas, we would probably think pretty highly of him. A real man of God, that Judas.

But all is not as it seems. As we continue to read John tells us why Judas was really so opposed to the anointing.

What a dishonorable guy! (v. 6)

[6] Now he said this, not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it.

Isn't this fascinating? Judas was trusted by the others in the apostolic band. He must have been or they wouldn't have appointed him treasurer. But he wasn't worthy of their trust. John calls him a thief.

Judas had been consistently stealing from the till, skimming off the top, to fill his own pockets.⁷ He wasn't concerned for the poor. He smelled the perfume filling the house and all he could think of were the shekels flowing through his sticky fingers.

Jesus knew what was going on. So, He rebuked Judas, and then invested Mary's act with a deeper significance than even she would have imagined.

Pic #4: Jesus Rebukes Judas (vv. 7-8)

[7] Therefore Jesus said, "Let her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of My burial. [8] For you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have Me."

⁷ I assume that the other disciples only found out about Judas' thievery after the fact, i.e. - after His death.

Jesus was not robbing the poor by accepting this act of worship. There is always opportunity to help those in need - and He is on record as being a great friend to the poor.

But, here's the point: when a golden opportunity for extravagant worship presents itself, throw caution to the wind, pull out all the stops and go for it. That's what Mary did. Jesus praised her for it and we honor her for it.

Reflect on the Pics...

Four snapshots. Four stories. Lots of questions.

What do we learn from **Mary**, from **Judas**, from **Jesus**, through these pics?

Certainly -

- We see that **Jesus** is worthy of all our worship.
- **Mary** shows us the compelling beauty of extravagant worship. She loved Jesus with her whole heart. She trusted Him as Savior and worshipped Him for the Lord He was. She takes us to an expression of worship that is beyond calculators and spreadsheets. What she did didn't make dollars and cents sense. It only makes sense if Jesus is the God/man.
- **Judas** shows us the danger of seeing Jesus as the Fulfiller of a personal life agenda. Like Mary and the other disciples, Judas had watched as Jesus performed miracles. He had followed Jesus for three years and knew Him as well as anyone. He had the respect and trust of his fellow disciples.⁸ BUT, he had never internalized the truth about Jesus. He never took Christ's message to heart. He held Jesus at arm's length throughout their time together. And when he finally realized that Jesus would not profit him (financially speaking) he rejected Jesus (spiritually speaking). A Savior to trust? A Lord to worship? I don't think so.

Let's each of us take a minute and look at these pictures closely.

⁸ He was also the only one of the twelve from the supposedly more spiritual southern region of Judea. "Iscaiot" meaning "a man from Keriioth" a city in Judea.

Do you see yourself? Do you see yourself worshipping as Mary did, extravagantly. Or are you tempted to worship on the cheap?

These two snapshots invite you and me to ask ourselves, “*Am I increasingly all about expressing gratitude to Jesus, no matter the cost, or am I out to see what I can get out of Jesus at any cost?”*

Today, what will be the expression of your extravagance when it comes to the worship of the Lord Jesus Christ?

Will it be a song, a prayer, a gift of time or money, an investment of energy? How “over the top” will it be?

Would it be possible that someone in the background might watch your ridiculously extravagant worship and scowl and suggest that you just wasted something?

The still photo of Mary, wiping Jesus’ feet with her perfume soaked hair invites all of us to join her in unalloyed, fervent, passionate, zealous worship!

The camera clicks again as the anointing event concludes. The picture that comes into focus is of a scene outside the house, not inside. Outside, there is a crowd of people milling around.

Outside the Home of Good Friends (vv. 9-11)

Pic #1: Crowds Have Come to See Jesus and Lazarus (v. 9)

[9] The large crowd of the Jews then learned that He was there; and they came, not for Jesus’ sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He raised from the dead.

Lazarus’ experience is recorded in John 11. If you are not familiar with it, it is an amazing story.

Lazarus had been deathly ill when Jesus received word from Mary and Martha that their brother was literally at death’s door.

Now, Lazarus was one of Jesus’ great friend. And we might have expected Jesus to immediately leave where He was and head down south to Bethany to heal Lazarus, upon hearing that he was sick.

But that is not what he did at all. No, Jesus lingered where He was for several days. Then, after time had passed, He left to go attend to Lazarus. But, by the time he arrived at the home in Bethany, Lazarus had already been dead for four days.

With a great crowd of witnesses standing by, Jesus stood in front of the tomb where Lazarus had been laid - four days earlier! - and commanded, ***[John 11:43] “Lazarus, come forth!”***

And Lazarus did indeed come forth. Jesus raised him from the dead. It was the greatest miracle Jesus had yet performed and it foreshadowed the even greater miracle of His own soon-to-come resurrection.

Back to the snapshot. We see crowds of people gathered at the home in Bethany. They wanted to see Jesus, of course, but they are also interested in seeing Lazarus.

I can understand the draw. I would have wanted to see the guy who had been raised from the dead, too. Wouldn’t you have wanted to see Lazarus? It’s not every day that you get to see someone who had been dead for four days, alive and kicking.

So, the crowds came to Bethany, and to the house of Mary, Martha and Lazarus to see the walking, breathing miracle of God with their own eyes.

They wanted to get confirmation that the rumors were all true. They were hungry, I would suggest, for God and for what only God can do.

We see all of that in the photo. But slightly off center, something catches our eye. There is a part of the crowd that shows something other than well-intentioned enthusiasm or even curiosity.

Pic #2: Not an Entirely Friendly Crowd... (vv. 10-11)

***[10] But the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death also;⁹
[11] because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and were believing in Jesus.***

There was a certain group within the larger crowd who weren't curiosity seekers, they weren't looking for proof of a miracle, and they weren't there for worship.

They were huddled together to put together a plot against Lazarus.

They were actually planning to kill Lazarus. I have always thought that, of those scenes involving the religious rulers, this is the saddest.

As if the poor guy hadn't died enough already, they are plotting to kill the now alive again Lazarus.

They were prepared to do anything to keep people from believing in Jesus. Mafia-like, they've already put out a hit on Jesus. Now they're doing the same thing to poor Lazarus.

Don't the actions of the religious rulers speak volumes to a thought that runs through many of our minds when we consider miracles?

Some of us are sometimes tempted to think, *"If I could only see a real bona-fide miracle, then I'd believe."*?

Or have you ever had the thought, *"If people who have doubts could just see a parting of the Red Sea, or a man-born-blind-now-sees miracle, problems associated with believing in Jesus or following Jesus would disappear."*?

It is a tempting thought - but it's a false one.

Look at this scene. There was nobody at Bethany who doubted that a miracle had occurred.

It was every bit as uncontested as the parting of the Red Sea.

And some people did come to the home, filled with excitement, ready to believe and follow. But there were others who bowed their necks, and put together a plan to do away with the evidence for the power of Jesus.

It turns out that there is more involved in a faith response than seeing a miracle. There's something about a willing heart.

Reflect on the pics...

Here we have two snapshots that tell two stories and pose a couple of questions.

Hold these still photos side by side, just like we did with the shots of Judas and Mary.

Some in the crowd were beating a path to Lazarus' home to validate that the rumors were all true. He really was alive. They were hungry to know.

Others knew full well that it was true and were looking to quash the evidence.

Here we see two groups of people exposed to the same data - Lazarus is alive! - arriving at the same home, and coming to completely different conclusions about what to do with that data.

If we were to play a sort of 1st century "Where's Waldo" and look for you in this photograph, in which sub-group would you have been found?

Would you have come to the home of Lazarus to find out if it was true? Could we insert you into that crowd? Would you have made the trip to Bethany to investigate the rumors?

To answer that question, try this: What are you doing **now** to deal with your doubts and spiritual questions?

⁹ The "also" indicates that they had already made firm plans to put Jesus to death.

There are books to read and people to seek out for answers.

You can seek the Lord in prayer and in many other ways look to find out if the evidence faith piles up - or not.

Or would you be found in discussion with the group of chief priests who were convinced of the power of Jesus, knew that Lazarus was alive, but were unwilling to go where that truth led them? Their mantra was, *“Don’t convince me with the facts about Lazarus being alive - I’ve got my mind made up!”* - would that be yours?

Spiritual hunger matched by intellectual integrity will result in an unwavering commitment to find the truth. Jesus claims to be the truth. He can handle your rigorous investigation. He invites it.

At the end of the day He wants you to have a satisfied mind. Any of us could find ourselves in after sincerely investigating the truth claims of Jesus placing our faith in Him and extravagantly worshiping Him - just like Mary.