

Anointed
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John 12:1-8

¹ Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ² There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³ Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" ⁶ (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.) ⁷ Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸ You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

First, some background. "Anoint" is a very rich word in the whole of the Bible. The verb "to anoint" is מָשַׁח (*maschach*) in Hebrew, from which we get *mashiach* or *messiah*, and is χρίω (*chrío*) in Greek, from which we get Χριστός (*christos*). Messiah and Christ both mean "anointed one." The verb "to anoint" is also ἀλείφω (*aleipho*) in Greek. Anointing with oil happened for two reasons in the ancient world – to moisturize skin in the dry desert environment (*aleipho*) and to designate someone as a leader as ordained by God (*chrío*). In moisturizing, the skin which was exposed was covered with oil. In publicly identifying a leader, oil was poured over the head. These people, these leaders, would be the ones called "anointed one" in the way with which we are most familiar.

Mary anointed in the *aleipho* way – maybe it was the word chosen because she was a woman and would not have any authority to anoint Jesus as a leader. Or maybe it was the word chosen to emphasize that those around Jesus didn't quite get, until after the fact, who he really was so she couldn't know to designate him as an anointed one. Or maybe it was the word chosen because the act is one of hospitality and soothing. I've always wondered, and never found an answer, as to why she used her hair to wipe his feet but I might have an idea. When you compare a towel to hair, especially since we're not talking 300 thread count towels in ancient times, hair is the softer of the two; hair is more soothing. Jesus had been walking

for three years all over the land, teaching, feeding, and healing, an act especially close to Mary, whose brother Jesus had raised from the dead.

Perhaps for this reason she did not take ordinary olive oil, which was so readily accessible, but instead took nard, which comes from a sweet-smelling flowering plant which grows in the Himalayas, China, and India,¹ not nearly as accessible, which, in turn, accounts for the costliness of the perfume. The sweetness of it would be a reason Jesus would reference the day of his burial. Remember Martha's argument why Jesus should not enter Lazarus' tomb? "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days."² A perfume like nard would mask the smell of what naturally happens when we return to the dust from which we came.

How interesting it is to me that *chrío* anointing is for the head and happens at the beginning of one's earthly leadership and Mary's *aleipho* anointing was upon Jesus' feet and at the end of his earthly ministry. In a presidential election year especially, the media likes to show what four or eight years of challenging leadership does to the appearance of the president, how it changes from beginning to end. This year has been no different, not only demonstrating a significant and noticeable increase of grey hairs but a worn and tired looking face (no disrespect meant). Given the choice at the end of a time of leadership, I think I would choose the soothing, even refreshing, *aleipho* anointing myself.

In this account we see Mary preparing Jesus for his last journey, a journey which would end at the cross, the hardest journey yet – not necessarily because of hard, rough, and rocky terrain but because of destination. It's not stated but implied that she would have taken her time in this gesture of hospitality, would have been gentle in this kindness. We know it was done intimately, intimate like the quiet sharing of a deeply personal story, intimate like the coziness of a home, intimate as if between people who care profoundly for one another, intimately like choosing to use one's very hair.

Have you ever heard someone who personally met someone famous or someone on whom they had a crush, and the encounter included some physical contact, say that "I'm

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spikenard>

² John 11:39

never washing my hand/elbow/left eyebrow/you-name-it again?” Somehow, in that moment, that touch was emblazoned on the skin. We say “I can still feel it” and we are reluctant to do anything that would change that feeling. I’m not suggesting Mary viewed Jesus as a rock star or a crush but I do believe the feel of that physical connection would have lasted, and long beyond that would the scent of the action be carried on her hair, its perfume released with every turn of her head, every tuck behind her ears, every time the sun heated her hair with its rays.

We won’t experience the lingering reminders of helping prepare Jesus for his last days, at least not the way Mary did. Remember, though, his words: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”³ We anoint the spirit with the very physical acts of meals and handshakes and holding feverish hands and making eye contact. When we take our time in these acts, when we are extravagant with our time in these acts, when we are singularly focused in these acts, when we are present, they linger on us, in us. And in these physical acts, Jesus reminds us “just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”⁴ Like Mary we will not know if this is someone’s last week, and yet, we know for each of us, the days to come are our last days for our first days are behind us. This is not just a Lenten charge to us, this is a lifetime charge: go out to soothe Jesus for the last days of his or her earthly journey.

Let us pray: O Lord, help us be extravagant in our tending to you, we pray. Amen.

³ Matthew 25:35-36

⁴ Matthew 25:40