

# *Reset: The Essential Church*

## “Worshipping”

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**Digging Deeper**

*Reset— The Essential Church: Worshipping*

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### **Background Notes**

**Key Scripture Text(s):** John 12:1-8; Matthew 26:1-13; Mark 14:3-9; Luke 7:36-50; and others throughout.

### **Introduction**

“Opening up” and “coming together” when applied to the life of the church can mean many things depending on the context. Our context is especially poignant. We have been separated from each other *physically* by the cautions of a plague, Covid-19, and we yearn to see one another, be with one another, and share common worship with one another in the flesh, not darkly, but “face to face, to know as we are known” to one another (1 Corinthians 13:12). Our distancing—social and otherwise—has not been pleasant, but necessary, so that we might “regard the interests of each other above our private interests” (Philippians 2:4). We have learned the hard new lessons about the delicate balance of freedom and safety, the limits of each, and the necessity of preferring one over the other when need requires it.

But we have not been distanced from God, socially or otherwise. He has been in our midst, alongside us in the pain of separation, and the sadness of loss. He is the holy One in our midst, “mighty is He ... mighty to save” (Zechariah 3:17). His name has been on our lips, in isolation; His work has been in our hands, at a distance; His paths have been beneath our feet, behind Him; His words have been on our lips, worshipping Him. In all of these acts of service we have sought to declare Him to the nations, separated from each other though we have been, and in that declaration He has been the heart of our worship, the soul of our praise, and the voice of our thanksgiving. Worship, during Covid-19, has been expressed in acts of service which our Lord has placed within our reach, even at times when it seemed our reach exceeded our grasp. But He has been faithful to honor the intentions of our hearts even when the limitations of our bodies seemed to stand in the way of entire worship shared together. And so we turn to one set of readings that remind us how worship belongs to the body of Christ even when its full expression appears isolated, solitary, and very much alone.

In the texts given for this week’s study, holy week still lies ahead. We are drawn especially to the profoundly moving text from the Fourth Gospel, *John*, which has parallels in *Mark* and *Matthew* and *Luke*. Here we meet familiar faces who have shared an astonishing event in the previous chapter, namely, the raising of Lazarus. A faithful reader of the text needs to pause and take spiritual inventory of previous material in John 11, reminded of the mournful scene at the tomb of Jesus’ dear friend, Lazarus, surrounded by sisters, Mary and Martha, and the townsfolk. Suddenly the ordinariness of sorrow yields to the unexpected command to remove the stone and to the piercing cry of Jesus, “Lazarus, Come forth!” The dead lives again! With this powerful image in mind, we now assemble with the little family in Bethany, six days before Passover, throwing a party in Jesus’ honor. What happens next comprises our discussion this week.

Looking back and looking forward involves readers of this passage in a mixture of emotions, partly sad, partly jubilant, and generally unsettled. What do we call this feeling: *thankful wonder*? The lead character brings her gratitude and devotion to Jesus, while carrying around inside the ominous threat of a future fraught with more tragedy. How will Mary give expression to such complexity? Her invitation is to look backward and forward at the same time, asking us to remember and then to expect. And we don’t have the luxury to do these things one at a time, but we are pulled in two directions at once, captivated by what’s coming while grounded in the past. Such a paradox of emotion fits the mood of holy week and of worship, where sudden shifts of the political winds immerse Jesus and his followers in cascading events that lead from life to death. Mary of Bethany is

right in the middle of everything, performing an act of worship so outrageous that even those who witnessed it complained.

Mary was worshipping. From her gestures and movements we recognize the richness and majesty of the man from Nazareth, and through her witness to him we observe the glimmers of God’s glory reflected in the urgency of her face. This is no ordinary worship performed under arched ceilings, accompanied by traditional instruments with the cadences of a well-composed lyric. There is nothing predictable about Mary. Her message speaks through the silence with deliberate movement, the silent scenario of one who knows that disturbing change is coming, cloudy with the unknown. She refuses to leave us comfortable with the past of Lazarus’ resurrection, no matter how triumphant that moment had been. Mary of Bethany worships, and gestures for us the lessons of the past and the openness of the future, where she looks with foreboding and hope.

*The texts invite to look both ways before we cross the worship road.* We don’t want to miss anything important, and we mustn’t lose our bearings in the intersection of past and future. Through worship, we stand at the center of the present, the eternal now of God’s presence, and in that sometimes awkward and uncertain place, we worship. And Mary leads us with her extravagant and costly gift.

### A Worship Text through Many Eyes

Our primary focus begins with John’s rendering of Mary’s story. That said, the evidence compels us to see in *Matthew*, *Mark* and *Luke* decidedly parallel accounts that fill in the blanks and yet allow room for *John* to perform his masterful literary story-telling feats. The Fourth Gospel maximizes the personal while respecting the delicate contours in each story told. What follows simply places these performances side-by-side. Take time to read, reflect, worship, and ask questions about the text as you do. Then give the text space to ask its questions of you!

### The Scripture Texts

| John 12:1-8   | Mark 14:3-9  | Matthew 26:1-13  | Luke 7:36-50  |
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| <p>Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup> Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. <sup>3</sup> Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.</p> <p><sup>4</sup> But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, <sup>5</sup> "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." <sup>6</sup> He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. <sup>7</sup> "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup> You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."</p> | <p><sup>3</sup> While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.</p> <p><sup>4</sup> Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, "Why this waste of perfume? <sup>5</sup> It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor." And they rebuked her harshly.</p> <p><sup>6</sup> "Leave her alone," said Jesus. "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. <sup>7</sup> The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. <sup>8</sup> She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. <sup>9</sup> I tell you the truth,</p> | <p><sup>6</sup> While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, <sup>7</sup> a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table.</p> <p><sup>8</sup> When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. "Why this waste?" they asked. <sup>9</sup> "This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor." <sup>10</sup></p> <p>Aware of this, Jesus said to them, "Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. <sup>11</sup> The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. <sup>12</sup> When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. <sup>13</sup> I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the</p> | <p><sup>36</sup> One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. <sup>37</sup> And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, <sup>38</sup> and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment.</p> <p><sup>39</sup> Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner."</p> <p><sup>40</sup> And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher." <sup>41</sup> "A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. <sup>42</sup> When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" <sup>43</sup> Simon answered, "The</p> |

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|  | <p>wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her" (Mark 14:3-9).</p> | <p>world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her"</p> | <p>one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." <sup>44</sup> Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. <sup>45</sup> You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. <sup>46</sup> You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. <sup>47</sup> Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little." <sup>48</sup> And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." <sup>49</sup> Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" <sup>50</sup> And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (Luke 7:36-50).</p> |
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### A Few Observations

If we consider only the performances of this incident by *Mark* and *Matthew*, there is substantial agreement on detail. A few simple observations make that clear:

1. Jesus is in Bethany, a town nearly two miles southeast of Jerusalem, up the slope of the Mount of Olives.
2. The setting is a meal at the home of someone called Simon the Leper. According to *Mark*, this took place two days before Passover (see 14:1)
3. An unnamed woman comes with an alabaster jar with expensive perfume and proceeds to pour it on the head of Jesus.
4. This act of extravagance draws criticism from some who are present: "the disciples" according to *Matthew*; "some of those present" according to *Mark*. Key points: 1) they spoke indignantly; 2) they complained about the "waste"; 3) they spoke of the monetary value: high price (*Matthew*); 300 denarii (*Mark*, equal to 300 days of wages).; 4) they said such value could have gone to the poor.; 5) *Mark* says they rebuked her harshly.
5. Jesus comes to the woman's defense. 1) "Leave her alone" (*Matthew*); 2) "why are you bothering her"; 3) "She has done a beautiful thing to me"; 4) "the poor you will always have with you ... but not me" (*Mark* adds the idea "you can help them any time you want"); 5) "She did what she could" (*Mark*), implying perhaps that her action was within her means; 6) the perfume was preparation for Jesus' burial: *Matthew* says it was "to prepare me for burial," while *Mark* says she did it beforehand; 7) future proclamations of the gospel throughout the world will honor her by telling this story.
6. In a separate section later in our *Notes* we will devote special consideration to Luke's treatment of the incident, which shares parallels with Matthew and Mark and then further develops the implications by speaking of forgiveness as an act of worship.

From John's account, we have these insights:

1. The incident happened six days before Passover, placing it within the last week of Jesus' earthly life.
2. Conscious of the events back in chapter 11, *John* wants to identify the woman with Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus who has just been raised from the dead.
3. Mary takes pure nard, an expensive perfume, and pours it on Jesus' feet, not his head, and then proceeds to wipe his feet with her hair. Emphasis on the aroma filling the house.
4. Objection comes, not from disciples or unnamed persons, but from Judas Iscariot, the betrayer. Like the others, Judas sees help for the poor as a better alternative and values the perfume the same as *Mark*: 300

denarii (300 days of wages). *John* (or an editor) offers commentary, reading the true motives of Judas whom he calls an embezzler.

5. In his defense of her, Jesus tells Judas that the intention was to “save this perfume for the day of my burial.”
6. *John* concludes his version in 12:9-11 with a crowd of curiosity seekers and ill-intentioned villains: the one to see Lazarus, raised from the dead; the other to plot Lazarus’ death. Consistent with the overall design in his Gospel, the writer once more underscores that “many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him.”

Comparing the accounts uncovers significant differences that are attributable to the manner in which oral tradition grew and was embellished through literary stylization and story-telling practices. Each writer and his editorial committee had their own ideas about how the story of Jesus should be told, and the Holy Spirit willingly allowed freedom in this endeavor. Nor should we, at this distance in time, argue (to borrow a metaphor from the Old Testament in Isaiah 29:16) with the potter how He chooses to make the pot, or in this case, the storyline! What *John* brings to the generally agreed-to account are the more personal touches of adding names (Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and Judas) that tie the incident into the larger narrative framework. It is not accidental that an incident about burial perfume should follow the story in John 11 of raising Lazarus from the dead. On the one hand, the raising of Lazarus points to the life-giving power of Jesus, while on the other hand, Jesus is himself going to his own death.

### Reflections on Worship from Mary of Bethany

What is strikingly different is John’s insistence that Mary poured the perfume on Jesus’ *feet* not on his head as in the parallel accounts. Curiously in the totally different performance from *Luke*, the sinful woman anoints Jesus feet with her tears and with ointment. In explaining her actions, Jesus notes that his host did not offer to wash his feet, as was the custom, but *she* went beyond custom and performed these extra deeds of hospitable care. Washing feet with water was customary. But so was proper regard for the head, as Jesus emphasizes in Luke’s Galilean account. About ceremonial respect for the head, Andre Legault has written:

The anointing of head was a natural and accepted gesture common at Eastern meals and an appropriate Oriental custom. People of the East even today, are actually more appreciative of unguents and perfumes than are the peoples of the West. The practice of anointing the head and the face was and is still today widespread, a shining skin being considered a mark of health and beauty.<sup>1</sup>

Old Testament texts stress the significance of head-anointing rituals:

How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! <sup>2</sup> It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron’s beard, down upon the collar of his robes. <sup>3</sup> It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore (Psalm 133:1-3)

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows (Psalm 23:5)

Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favors what you do. <sup>8</sup> Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil (Ecclesiastes 9:7-8).

*Luke* helps clarify the reference to the feet in relationship to the head, by showing increased expression of Mary’s devotion to Jesus. When *John* focuses interest on Mary’s anointing of Jesus’ feet, this by no means denies the claims of the other Gospels about treatment of his head. In the popular telling, features of *Luke* have shaped the form of John’s account in the final form of his Gospel. Mary knew what she was doing, even if she didn’t fully comprehend the depth of its meaning. All three parallel accounts recognize the woman’s deed as foreshadowing Jesus’ coming death and burial.

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<sup>1</sup> Andre Legault, “An Application of the Form-Critique Method to the Anointings in Galilee and Bethany,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 16 (1954), 137.

Moreover, in two instances, her actions are called “beautiful.” Such language corresponds to a familiar Old Testament text:

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!" (Isaiah 52:7).

Beauty is here connected to the proclamation of the Gospel with its message of peace, salvation, and the reign of God. That message in *Isaiah* is destined to fill the earth (Isaiah 11:9). When we gather up these references, they shed light on the telling of the Gospel stories. The woman’s perfume fills the house with its aroma; what she does is beautiful; the future telling of the good news will make reference to the woman’s deed.

Another trajectory appears in 11:1-2 which introduces the account of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Even before *John* tells the story of Mary in chapter 12, he refers to Mary as “the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.” The manner in which the writer inserts this fact into the text may imply that Mary’s involvement was well-established in the tradition *John* knew, and so he is free to allude to it even *before* the incident happens in his Gospel! Furthermore, when he speaks of the act of anointing Jesus, he uses a two-fold description that begins with the more general “poured perfume *on the Lord*,” and referencing only Jesus’ feet with reference to Mary’s hair. Thus, we have wiggle room in the text for both his head and his feet within John’s version.

From a cultural perspective, it was once thought that feet were primarily *washed* with and not *anointed*. However, J. F. Coakley cites no less than eight instances from ancient Greek texts that plainly document both washing with water and anointing with oil.<sup>2</sup> What Coakley infers from his examples is that paying attention to the head was an ordinary courtesy, while caring for the feet with ointment “was extraordinary.” Certainly performing such an act of devotion during the meal would not have been expected in any case. The scourging and crucifixion of Jesus’ body are prefigured in Mary’s actions, for the Gospels tell of his crown of thorns on his head and the nails in his feet.

As to Mary’s use of her hair after pouring the oil, much has been written and debated! Was this not a violation of public decency for a woman to “let her hair down” in the service of a man to whom she was not married? We must be careful here, lest we reveal our own prejudices or proclivities. There is a tendency to imagine Jesus without sexuality at all, and so we push back from considering that Mary could have done this at all. But that reluctance is silliness, it seems to me, and refusing to allow Jesus any sexual feelings flies in the face of scriptures which honestly disclose that he was fully human (Hebrews 5:1; 2:11, 14). John A.T. Robinson put this in fine form when he called a chapter in one of his books, simply, “A Man.”<sup>3</sup> We are tempted to maintain a view of Jesus’ goodness that undermines his true humanity.

What Mary did for Jesus was an act of private and intimate devotion. The church father, Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca 350-428 CE), once wrote:

For it was as if the woman planned this so as to attach the fragrance of our Lord’s flesh to her body. For she took care that she should always be with him: she did this in her love so that if she should come to be separated from him, by this she could suppose he was with her still.<sup>4</sup>

The striking thing about this comment is the way Mary’s devotion to Jesus has a very personal and physical aspect to it, and that Theodore did not shy away from the senses in describing how she experienced Jesus.

Our emphasis this week on *Worship* leads us to propose that Mary’s act of devotion was a *sweet* act of worship, as well as a *costly* one. And, the prominence of the perfume underscores the role of the senses. We are inclined to strip Christian worship of all but a few senses, preserving at the very least sound and sight. Yet, the tangible

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<sup>2</sup> J. F. Coakley, “The Anointing at Bethany and the Priority of John,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107/2 (1988), 247-248.

<sup>3</sup> John A.T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1973), 36-66, but especially his comments on 64.

<sup>4</sup> Cited from J.-M. Vosté (CSCO 115; Louvain: CSCO, 1940), 233.

dimension of worship requires a renewed attention to all the senses, including touch, taste, and *smell*. In the case of John's version of the story, the perfume "filled the house" with its fragrance. This is not a minor detail. References to this sense are found throughout the Bible, as these texts illustrate:

Your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia. From ivory palaces stringed instruments make you glad (Psalm 45:8).

And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Ephesians 5:2).

I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God (Philippians 4:18).

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.<sup>15</sup> For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.<sup>16</sup> To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life (2 Corinthians 2:14-16).

Yahweh smelled the pleasant aroma [of Noah's sacrifice]. Yahweh said in his heart, "I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake, because the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I ever again strike everything living, as I have done (Genesis 8:21).

And let them all be burned on the altar as a burned offering to the Lord: a sweet smell, an offering made by fire to the Lord (Exodus 29:18).

I will take pleasure in you as in a sweet smell, when I take you out from the peoples and get you together from the countries where you have been sent in flight; and I will make myself holy in you before the eyes of the nations (Ezekiel 20:41).

If *John* identifies the aroma of Mary's gift for Jesus by how much it filled the house where all were gathered, then we must imagine the implications in connection with these numerous passages just cited. To her, Jesus was the precious giver of life who raised her brother Lazarus from the dead. When all feared opening Lazarus tomb because of the odor of death, Jesus assured them that he was the resurrection and the life who turned to stench of dead into the fragrance of life. Her worship is the celebration of life.

There is also irony here, as Jesus draws out the mysterious meaning of Mary's aromatic gift. The substance Mary poured out had many uses:

... the Greek word *myron* normally refers to a perfume or ointment made of myrrh. Either as dried powder or liquid, *myron* was made from the gummy resin that exudes from a low shrubby balsam tree which grows in west central South Arabia and in northern Somaliland. It was used as incense, in cosmetics, perfume, medicines, and in burial preparation. ... However, John's use of *myron* (also Mark 14:3) is more generic, in the general sense of "perfume," for this *myron* is not of myrrh but of nard.

... Also known as spikenard, this is a fragrant oil derived from the root and spike (hair stem) of the nard plant which grows in the mountains of northern India.<sup>5</sup>

The sweet smell triggers memories that range from attractive perfume and sacred sacrifice to burial preparations. Jesus sees her deed as preparation for his burial, and yet it is difficult to isolate the other meanings based on their performance in the text, especially that of worship that is sweet to God. We are reminded by John that this was *pure* nard, from the Greek word *pistikos* (literally, "faithful" or "true"). For Mary of Bethany the worship of Jesus could be nothing less than *pure, faithful, and true*, offered to the One whom Scripture calls all of those things (Revelation 3:14; 19:11).

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<sup>5</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (i-xii)*. Anchor Bible. Vol.29. Ed. W. F. Albright, et. al. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1966), 448.

An illustration from Israel's Temple sheds additional light. In the outer courtyard of the Temple stood a great altar of sacrifice where public offerings were made throughout the day, as well as on days of special celebration. Animals died here, their blood poured out, and their bodies consumed, billows of smoke rising from the altar. Priests who served at this altar carried around the odor of this experience — the smell of death — and their hands blackened by fire and smoke. Just beyond the altar was an equally large basin, a laver filled with water for the priests to wash their hands. Then, not far ahead, was the entrance to the Holy Place, the first room of the Temple sanctuary. In this room, removed from the bustle and odors of the outer court, there stood an altar of incense on which were sprinkled aromatics made from the same sort of nard contained in Mary's offering. What a contrast this Temple arrangement presented: The odor of death and the aroma of life! Thus, the scene in John 12 presents us with these complex trajectories of Jesus' own life, made clear in the aroma and in the anointing. As holy week approaches, we are caught up in their cross-currents as well, living as we do between the aroma and the anointing of Jesus.

Another dimension that appears in the three Gospels, including *John*, is the issue of "the poor." The offering of Mary was both "costly" (*John* uses the Greek *polytimos*) and "valuable" (*Mark* uses *polytelēs*). A year's wages is assigned to the perfume. Jesus comments about the gift in Mark 14:8 that in offering it, the woman "did what she *could*." The Greek has, "What she had, she did," suggesting that it was within her power to do it. Did Mary have substantial means? Perhaps. Watching a person with visible wealth using it in a certain way may trigger violent reactions from those with less means, especially in the economic order of Jesus' day among his own people. What the critics allege is that such perfume ought to have been sold; that its very possession was an offence to the poor (and to them!).

Among the critics, Judas is the least persuasive, given John's comments in 12:6. The disciples and the others may have simply been jealous of Mary's ability to do such an extravagant thing for Jesus, while they did not. We don't know for sure. What puzzles readers at first is Jesus' seemingly flippant remark about the poor. Was not Jesus the champion of the poor and often relentless in his criticism of the rich whose wealth kept them from the kingdom of God (see Matthew 19:23; Mark 10:23; Luke 18:24)? Did he not say, "Blessed are the poor ... Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matthew 5:3; Luke 6:20)?

In response to these concerns, it's important to know where the words came from that Jesus used here: "The poor you will always have with you..." According to Torah, God wanted no permanent underclass in Israelite society. The clearest affirmation of this comes from *Deuteronomy*:

<sup>4</sup> However, there should be no poor among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, <sup>5</sup> if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today. <sup>6</sup> For the LORD your God will bless you as he has promised, and you will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. You will rule over many nations but none will rule over you. <sup>7</sup> If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. <sup>8</sup> Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs (Deuteronomy 15:4-8).

Jesus would heartily agree with the sentiment of this important text. His comments are intentionally provocative, for by saying "The poor you will always have with you..." he is actually indicting the fact that Israel has failed to live up to the Torah covenant about poor people which says the opposite: "There should be *no poor* among you." In effect, Jesus casts doubt on the sincerity of their remarks, for if they cared so much about the poor, why hadn't they done something about it? Why did they not sell what they had and give to the poor, as Jesus had repeatedly asked them to do, rather than dictate to Mary how she should manage her assets?

Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." <sup>22</sup> When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth (Matthew 19:21-22).

Speaking about the poor, as his critics did, sounded to Jesus more like a little mantra that they unfurled from time to time when it was convenient for them to do. This was one of those occasions. By contrast, Mary gave concrete demonstration that she would devote the costly and the valuable to Jesus. Her willingness to worship

in this way showed the others what Jesus expected from them also. By devoting so much to the burial of Jesus, Mary was also confessing the importance of his coming death.

The scene inside the house at Bethany draws our attention to the *family* of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. When the other Gospels refer to the house as belonging to “Simon the Leper” (Matthew 26:6; Mark 14:3), it may be that Simon is the patriarch of the household and the others are his adult children. Some commentators make this connection in order to give coherence to the reading of the three parallel texts. Of course, this is conjecture, and we know that each evangelist crafts his material uniquely based on sources at his disposal, not necessarily attempting harmonization with the other Gospels. Still, the image of the little family gathered around Jesus and hosting a meal in Jesus’ honor cannot help but inspire us to think about the church as the family of God. *If so, then Mary becomes the worship leader during Jesus’ final days, and her family experiences the fragrance of her act of extravagance.*

This same family (with Lazarus not named) appears in Luke’s Gospel under a different setting, with Mary showing a similar form of devotion to Jesus:

<sup>38</sup> As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. <sup>39</sup> She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. <sup>40</sup> But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!” <sup>41</sup> “Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, <sup>42</sup> but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:38-42).

Notice the sharp contrast between the sisters. Martha appears in the story as the entirely practical person, quick to show hospitality (“opened her home to him”) and absorbed in the task of meal preparation. It’s really hard to fault her energy, attentiveness to detail, and deep sense of fairness when her sister fails to “help.” In all our families are likeminded “troopers” who set their minds on “getting the job done.” And we are grateful for them and for their diligence. Jesus’ response to Martha’s complaint about Mary has less to do with his disregard for her hard work and more to do with her life that is “worried and upset about many things” when “only one thing is needed.”

Soren Kierkegaard explored this theme of the “one needful thing” in his writings, reminding us of it through one of his titles, *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*.<sup>6</sup> In it he called for loving God above all else, and, in practical ways, identified barriers to doing so. His text was James 4:8, “Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” Drawing near to God is, above all, an act of *worship* through which life’s regular distractions are set aside by an overwhelming preoccupation with God, His person and works. In a helpful excerpt, the writer prayerfully reflects to God:

Wherever a man may be in the world, whichever road he travels, when he wills one thing he is on a road that leads him to Thee! Here such a far-flung enumeration would only work harm. Instead of wasting many moments on naming the vast multitude of goals or squandering life’s costly years in personal experiments upon them, can the talk do as life ought to do — with a commendable brevity stick to the point?<sup>7</sup>

If we might take a little liberty with Kierkegaard, is not *worship the point*? Does not everything about being a follower of God through Jesus Christ begin at this *point*? And Jesus, in Luke’s Gospel (above), says of Mary “she chose what is *better*” or, as the Kierkegaard phrased it, *the good*: “The reward of the good man is to be allowed to *worship in truth*.”<sup>8</sup> For Mary of Bethany that meant sitting at the feet of Jesus where she might soak up everything he said with a purposeful heart so that she might do whatever he commanded. She was both a disciple and a worshipper.

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<sup>6</sup> First published in English in 1938 by Harper, with an introductory essay by Douglas V. Steere.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Bretall, ed., *A Kierkegaard Anthology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), 272.

<sup>8</sup> Bretall, 281.

It is helpful, then, to compare Luke's handling of this incident with John's portrait in this week's main text. Through the comparison we discover *Mary moving from sitting at Jesus feet to anointing them in humble, devoted worship*. But we leave room for more on Luke's rendition later in our study.

Earlier in John's Gospel, in chapter 4, Jesus engages in conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well of Sychar, and ultimately discusses the question of *worship*. Full of many questions, the woman finds in Jesus the one who knew her better than she knew herself (4:29). She also discovered fresh insights into the nature of *worship*. Posing the controversial question that separated Jew and Samaritan, she wonders aloud *where* worship is supposed to happen, whether on Mount Gerazim in Samaria or in Jerusalem at the Jewish temple. Succinctly, Jesus tells her:

<sup>21</sup> Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ... <sup>23</sup> Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. <sup>24</sup> God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4:21, 23-24).

Uncoupling the geography of worship from its heart-intention, Jesus tells his conversation partner that God is actually "seeking" worshippers who are less concerned about a monopoly on worship and more committed to aligning their spirits with the true nature of God through worship. Using the phrase "the time is coming," Jesus raises expectations that a newness of worship is about to burst upon the world. Like Mary of Bethany, the woman of Samaria discovers that devotion to Jesus means letting go of what she deems good so that she might receive from him what is best. With literary skill, the writer tells us, "leaving her water jar," she returns to her village where her encounter with Jesus becomes a worshipful witness about the man "who told me everything I ever did" (4:29). Worship of the kind Jesus anticipated meant leaving behind the daily preoccupations so that God might have access to everything we are and do.

Reflecting on worship for us and in our time, N. T. Wright has written:

Worship is not an optional extra for the Christian, a self-indulgent religious activity. It is the basic Christian stance. 'Worship' derives from 'worth-ship': it means giving God all he's worth.<sup>9</sup>

He goes on to elaborate that worship underscores God's *true value* and how it is that we come to recognize that in tangible ways. This includes the *beauty* of God, expressed in a variety of ways, both in nature and through us. Beauty is an aesthetic value and not easily nailed down, either in dollars and cents or philosophically. If I want you to appreciate the beauty of a painting, my best strategy is to tell you, "Will you look at *that!*" And so, in the Bible, the beauty of God often appears in breath-taking scenery as is the case in Revelation 4 and 5 where countless crowds of worshiper show us what God is like, rich with color, sound, and choreography. Or, reading the ancient text of *Isaiah*, we come across chapter 33 where we see "the king in His beauty."

Again, Wright, in a poignant (and brilliant) rendition of a familiar text, tells us (this is really good stuff!):

Worship is humble and glad; worship forgets itself in remembering God; worship celebrates the truth as God's truth, not its own. True worship doesn't put on a show or make a fuss; true worship isn't forced, isn't half-hearted, doesn't keep looking at its watch, doesn't worry what the person in the next pew may be doing. True worship is open to God, adoring God, waiting for God, trusting God even in the dark.

Worship will never end; whether there be buildings, they will crumble; whether there be committees, they will fall asleep; whether there be budgets, they will add up to nothing. For we build for the present age, we discuss for the present age, and we pay for the present age; but when the age to come is here, the present age will be done away. For now we see the beauty of God through a glass, darkly, but then face to face; now we appreciate only part, but then we shall affirm and appreciate God, even as the living God has affirmed and appreciated us. So now our tasks are worship, mission and management, these three; the greatest of these is worship.<sup>10</sup>

Can you hear the echoes of 1 Corinthians 13 in what the author has done with these two paragraphs? He invites us to substitute *worship* for *love*, reminding us that:

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<sup>9</sup> N. T. Wright, *For All God's Worth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 1.

<sup>10</sup> Wright (1997), 9.

... worship is nothing more or less than love on its knees before the beloved; just as mission is love on its feet to serve the beloved — and just as the Eucharist, as the climax of worship, is love embracing the beloved and so being strengthened for service.

So back in Bethany, in the home of the little family of Simon the Leper, Lazarus, Martha, and Mary, we are once again reminded by the aroma of an outrageous gift what the beauty of worship looks like. *Mary, by her actions, preached the good news that Jesus is worth everything she owns* as the expensive perfume symbolized. So what happens when we worship Jesus “with everything we have”? Well, people like Judas will turn up, full of self-righteousness and hypocrisy wondering what right we have to disrupt the ordinary flow of common sense. They don’t like worship without inhibitions and prefer the sort of detachment that can be kept neatly on a ledger book inside his money purse. Just listen to the buzz in church when money is being spent, and you will learn quickly how important God’s beauty is to the givers.

Worship from Mary of Bethany is enthusiastic, even as it is serious. The two attitudes don’t need to be far apart. She was dead serious about her offering to Jesus. He was, after all, on his way to the cross, a journey that few, including Mary, fully understood, and even resisted. But she was willing to “let go” in the midst of the crazy world that Jesus attracted around her, and so her worship takes the form of reckless adoration. At Bethany, Wright notes, “Jesus comforts the disturbed and disturbs the comfortable. He wants us to be his agents in doing so. ... Come with me, then, to Bethany. It’s a short journey, but a steep one. From here, on a clear day, you can see for ever.”<sup>11</sup>

If we worship according to the pattern found in the life of Jesus and his first followers, then what happens ought to be *subversive* and therefore counter cultural. Mary wasn’t following any rules when she poured out the costly perfume. She seemed committed to Jesus more than to the conventions. Plenty of social conventions bind us most days of the week, and so we devote ourselves to working, playing, and consuming with the expectation that things will one day be better than they are now. We are told through the media liturgies of television and internet that if we just live this way, we are guaranteed a better existence, whether by a better beer, or a trip to the health club, or a new car, or the proper medication for our inadequacies. In each of these seductions, there dawns in our minds a *false worship*. But when we gather for worship, there presents to us a fresh opportunity to disavow loyalty to any of those false gods. Through song and prayer and word and sacrament, we have a new chance to say “No!” to the old way of being human. Worship is, then, a decision to change allegiance, and it is a subversive decision we must make every day. When our mouths form the words “Jesus is Lord,” there is a refusal to accept any other lords in his place. And that is the courage of worship and the call to be citizens of a different kingdom, ruled by a wholly different Master.

What the Bethany story tells us is that worship isn’t just words or music or ritual, though it may well include all of those — and does. Worship is offering *ourselves* to God in devotion as followers of His Son, Jesus Christ. That’s what we learn from Romans 12:1-2.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-- this is your spiritual act of worship. <sup>2</sup> Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is-- his good, pleasing and perfect will.

God’s *worth* requires from His worshippers all of their worth. Worship is, after all, *worthship*. King David was once given the opportunity to acquire a piece of land to build an altar for the worship of God. The owner, a man named Araunah, respecting David’s status as king, offered to donate the property and the necessary elements for worship. But the king refused, with these words:

"No, I insist on paying the full price. I will not take for the LORD what is yours, or sacrifice a burnt offering that costs me nothing" (1 Chronicles 21:24).

He knew that considering “all God’s worth,” he could hardly accept for free what should cost him everything.

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<sup>11</sup> Wright (1997), 92.

## The Unique Perspective of *Luke* on the Woman's Worship (Luke 7:36-50)

In his essay, "A Woman's Unbound Hair in the Greco-Roman World, with Special Reference to the Story of the 'sinful woman' in Luke 7:36-50,"<sup>12</sup> Charles Cosgrove explores the social context for this powerful story in the life of Jesus — a story involving a woman who, out of devotion to Jesus and in search of forgiveness, did the unthinkable. A few of his observations will aid our analysis of this text.

The woman who dominates the narrative is styled as "a woman of the city, who was a sinner." The Greek word *hamartōlos* doesn't reveal much by itself, only that the woman "in the city" had a reputation, and it wasn't a good one! Some scholars categorically affirm that she was a prostitute. However, that term does not appear in the text, and there were certainly other sins that might have tagged her with the moniker "sinner," including unfaithfulness to her husband or even marriage to a tax collector (guilt by association). Any number of compromises with paganism might attract this designation. The Pharisee in the story is concerned, as we would expect, about the "sort of woman" Jesus would allow to "touch him." As in the previous story of the woman with the issue of blood, we have the question of ritual purity coming front and center in this passage. A true prophet, it is alleged, would never allow such a "sinner" to touch him, so as to make him ceremonially impure.

We are left in the dark about the sequence of events involving the woman's hair which, as Cosgrove points out in his article, has relevance to the whole narrative. Married women kept their hair bound, usually with a comb or other ornament, and then covered their head. Unmarried women had greater liberties. Since we don't know her marital status, the particular rules applying to her are uncertain. The mere fact that she used her hair to wipe Jesus' feet doesn't play largely in the story, though the audience might well have assumed, based on their social sensitivities, that her behavior was out of order. We will turn to that question in a moment.

What we do need to figure out is why she came and why she acted as she did toward Jesus. What were her aims? First impressions would also lead first hearers to puzzle about the meaning of the woman's gestures as a whole: the kissing of the feet, the weeping, the use of her hair to wipe Jesus' feet, the anointing with ointment. This sequence of actions is open to at least two interpretations: 1) the woman wants something from Jesus and is seeking his favor, or 2) she has received something from him and is expressing her gratitude.

Especially important in unraveling this mystery is the simple fact *that she was weeping*. No one in the first century, noting her demeanor, would conclude that she was acting in a sexually provocative fashion. There is solid precedent in the ancient world for women who were in a state of grief or mourning to act as this woman acted, including the symbolic action of "letting down her hair" — conduct having a wholly different meaning in our culture! If we compare this text with John 12 where Mary engages in similar actions just prior to the death of Jesus, it evidently points to devotion and love for Jesus, in his words, "anointing for my burial." Ceremonies for burial often included the sorts of actions the woman displayed. But so did rituals of devotion. Kissing the feet of someone indicated gratitude and a willingness to serve them. Both circumstances might apply in the case of the woman. Jesus makes the point — as a good teacher might — that she performed forms of hospitality that his Pharisee host had neglected.

Cosgrove summarizes the ways the woman's action would have been understood:

Given the conventional social meanings of the gestures and their appearance in the setting of a Pharisee hosting the holy man Jesus at dinner, first-century Mediterranean hearers would not be any more justified than modern readers are in construing the woman's behavior as sexually provocative or shameful. They *would* be justified in construing her actions as expressions of grief, gratefulness, propitiation, or pleading.<sup>13</sup>

If we listen carefully to Jesus' commendation of the woman, her role as a surrogate host stands out. Her character places her above the Pharisee in her attentiveness to the needs of her guest, someone she has reason not only to admire but to revere. So determined are her acts of devotion that she "crashes the party" given by

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<sup>12</sup> Charles H. Cosgrove, in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124 no. 4, Winter 2005, pp. 675-692.

<sup>13</sup> Cosgrove, p. 688.

the Pharisee for Jesus and the other guests. Jesus honors her conduct as a deep form of love which comes from a prior experience of forgiveness.

This last observation leads us to suspect that, before the Pharisees' dinner, Jesus and the woman had met each other, and during this encounter Jesus had extended forgiveness to her. Filled with overwhelming joy and tears of thankfulness, the woman takes the opportunity afforded by the banquet to show her deep love to Jesus. One can hardly fault her lack of etiquette, both in light of her gratitude and of the Pharisees' neglect of hospitality toward Jesus. Some scholars raise the possibility that the account of Jesus and the woman accused of adultery in John 7:53-8:11 might afford an appropriate prequel to this account in Luke. That passage does not appear in the oldest manuscripts of John's Gospel, but it is still regarded as an authentic text which became detached from its original source and then included after John 7:52 at a later time.<sup>14</sup> Might the account once have been part of Luke's Gospel? In any case, the *sort of narrative* as we find in John 7:53-8:11 would certainly explain the woman's gratitude.

Wrapped inside the story is a short parable offered by Jesus to his host. It concerns two men: one who owed his creditor much and the other who owed him little. Neither could repay the debt, and so the munificent creditor cancels both debts. The question raised by the parable is "who loved the creditor more," to which the Pharisee renders his reluctant judgment, "I suppose, the one who owed more." The Greek verb for "suppose" is *hupolambanō* which may also mean simply, "I reply with..." an appropriate way for a debate partner to accept the challenge of the parable. "I'll render my opinion" also works in this setting and is supported by the classical use of the verb form.

The woman's reputation as "a sinner" is, in itself, not primary for the Pharisee. What is primary is that Jesus, who had the reputation of being a prophet, allows the woman to touch him in apparent ignorance of her reputation. Had Jesus been a true prophet, he would have "divined" her true character and forbidden her familiarity with him. In reply, Jesus reveals something the Pharisee did not know: that Jesus had, at some point in the past, declared the woman *forgiven*. Jesus does not consider her to be a sinner any longer, and, he implies, nor should the Pharisee.

Ironically, the woman knows Jesus better than the Pharisee does. She acknowledges that the debt of her sin has been cancelled, and that Jesus is responsible for her present forgiven state. Even the other guests show a remarkable openness to Jesus by inquiring, "Who is this?", and then go on to declare that he forgives sins with obvious effectiveness in the case of the woman. Throughout these closing remarks, the Pharisee is strangely silent. Jesus the Master Teacher has instructed his host by example, as well as by word. To do so, he must "force" the Pharisee to pay attention to the woman's actions and what they mean. Too hastily looking past *her* into order to doubt *Jesus*, the Pharisee must be reminded that the woman is the real *lesson to be learned*. Jesus says forcefully to the Pharisee, "Do you see this woman?" and so re-directing the attention of their shared conversation.<sup>15</sup>

What does Jesus expect the Pharisee to learn from the woman? Primarily, his focus is on the forgiveness of her sins and the subsequent gratitude she shows to Jesus. Why can't the Pharisee enter into the spirit of this celebration of forgiveness? Jesus implies that the Pharisee is like the man in the parable who didn't owe much because he hadn't sinned much. He looks at himself as relatively debt-free, and whatever little he might "owe" can just be cancelled without paying much notice to his creditor's generosity. Since God corresponds to the

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<sup>14</sup> The passage is not found in *John* in any of the earliest surviving Greek Gospel manuscripts; neither in the two 3rd century papyrus witnesses to John - P66 and P75; nor in the 4th century Codex Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, although all four of these manuscripts may acknowledge the existence of the passage via diacritical marks at the spot. The first surviving Greek manuscript to contain the passage is the Latin/Greek diglot Codex Bezae of the late 4th or early 5th century. Papias (circa AD 125) refers to a story of Jesus and a woman "accused of many sins" as being found in the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, which may well refer to this passage. One manuscript, Minuscule 826, placed the account after Luke 21:38.

<sup>15</sup> A thought-provoking treatment of this important phrase comes from "Do You See This Woman?" Luke 7:36-50 as a Paradigm for Feminist Hermeneutics, by Barbara E. Reid, *Biblical Research*, 40 1995, pp. 37-49.

creditor, the indictment of the Pharisee comes off as serious. He doesn't think that God needs to forgive him much, and so he takes little notice of either Jesus or the woman.

The declaration of forgiveness is the good news that Jesus brings. The profound pronouncement, "Your sins have been forgiven," is the welcomed revelation that God's forgiveness is made known in Jesus' *wonderful activity*. A host invites Jesus to dinner and thoughtlessly receives his guest as a stranger. A woman intrudes and performs a striking display of thoughtfulness that marks the appreciation of a hostess who is especially indebted to her guest. The "normal," routine response to the intrusion is made to seem odd, and the "unusual," affectionate display of gratitude is made to seem natural. In this way Jesus illustrates his unique form of instruction: The familiar is made to seem strange—and the strange familiar.<sup>16</sup> A beautiful blending of words and deeds contribute once more to the reputation of Jesus as Master Teacher.

But we must not miss the lessons Jesus himself commends in the woman. There is her *love*, born out of her forgiveness. There is her lavish *gratitude* exhibited in powerfully symbolic actions. Then, as the narrative reaches its conclusion, Jesus speaks about her *faith*: "Your faith has saved you; go in peace," Jesus encourages her. It would be worth studying further the ways in which her *faith* made their appearance in the text. What sorts of evidences do we have for her faith? None of them involve direct words. Many of them appear as decisive actions. Even in her tears she discloses the pathos of her faith, whereas in her pouring of perfume, and in wiping her tears from his feet with her hair she reveals her devotion to the person of Jesus. Perhaps above all, this story teaches us the lessons of forgiveness and worship, and what they really means in light of her example and Jesus' response to it.<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

*We become what we worship.* From the ancient psalms of Israel comes this selection:

<sup>3</sup> Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him. <sup>4</sup> But their idols are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. <sup>5</sup> They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; <sup>6</sup> they have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but they cannot smell; <sup>7</sup> they have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but they cannot walk; nor can they utter a sound with their throats. <sup>8</sup> Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them (Psalm 115:3-8).

The Gospel story reminds us that not only is "our God in heaven," but through the Word become flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, He has taken up his residence on earth. When we speak of the *incarnation*, worship takes on a new shape for us, for we are invited to adore the one who shared our flesh and blood, and gave imagination on earth to the God in heaven, so that the invisible is now tangible for us. "But we see Jesus," pens the writer of *Hebrews* (2:9), and so we may worship God truly with all our senses. Our worship touches, and, yes, thanks to Mary of Bethany, also smells the aroma of our Savior. No need to make an idol, for Jesus is the image of God and he is the fragrance of God.

And sensing Him, we worship Him, and worshipping Him we become like Him. Marva Dawn has written:

We worship God because God is so worthy. One of the results of our worship will be that we shall be changed. The more we embrace all that God is as we royally waste our time in his presence, the more his holy splendor will nurture our character ... acknowledging that God is behind everything; it leads to more thorough thanksgiving.<sup>18</sup>

She adds in a later section, "the main reason to *sing* in worship is that God is so singable," and she identifies more than fifty invitations in the Bible "to sing praises to God." "Primarily we sing in worship to display, become more aware of, embrace, and respond to the splendor of God."<sup>19</sup> As Psalm 13:6 declares: "I will sing to the LORD, because he has been good to me."

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<sup>16</sup> James L. Resseguie, "Making the Familiar Seem Strange," *Interpretation*, 46 no. 3 July 1992, pp 285-290.

<sup>17</sup> See "Forgiveness of Sins (Luke 7:36-50)," by: John J. Kilgallen, *Novum Testamentum*, 40 no. 2 April 1998, pp. 105-116.

<sup>18</sup> Marva J. Dawn, *A Royal "Waste" of Time* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 215.

<sup>19</sup> Dawn (1999), 287.

Mary of Bethany was not alone in her worship of Jesus, and even though some objected to the way she honored Jesus, yet her actions were visible, public, and fragrantly accessible to all in the house. Worship, whether in acts of costly sacrifice or in joyful song, unites the community, and that is why the form of worship matters. If acts of worship cannot be shared, but only performed, they contribute to detachment and foster an individualistic spirituality. Songs that are difficult to sing within a congregation, leave the worshippers without any words to bring. Chords of discord, like those of Judas Iscariot, remind us that there is:

... a contrast between a life of self-centeredness and greed and a model of self-sacrificing love, one of the central tenets of John's message that is today more relevant than ever.<sup>20</sup>

Worship is the context for this contrast to engage and be resolved. Judas was the perfect foil for Mary's devotion.

Once more, the primary consideration for worship is: "to glorify God and respond to him, that as a result the community will be enhanced and the believers' character will be nurtured."<sup>21</sup> And to the seeker, such demonstrations of worship will be a witness to the transformation power of the Gospel. In the words of Paul,

... and they will fall to their knees and worship God, declaring, "God is truly here among you" (1 Corinthians 14:25).

This is where we are at this moment in our history as the beloved community worshipping on "Bell Road." *Hope* bursts the soil of dormancy richly filled with life waiting to appear once more and be shared once again. We take small steps, aware of the enemy's wiles and the plague's wiliness. We take steps of faith, "for perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). We follow the lead of the Spirit who promises to "guide us into all truth...showing us what is to come" (John 16:13). God is in the future where we are going with each small step of faith, and He keeps coming toward us with "healing in his wings" (Malachi 4:2). At this moment of new beginnings, fresh starts, opening up, and worshipping *together*, the risen Lord becomes the faithful *Omega* for our faith-filled *Alpha*. And so we receive the word of our Lord, "Fear not, I am with you" (Isaiah 41:10, and elsewhere).

These new steps make us feel like Peter when Jesus appeared to the disciples in the storm while they huddled in the boat. We listen for the Savior's voice and so the story unfolds of the untried journey on uncharted waters into the presence of the Lord of the storm — of our storm:

<sup>28</sup> "Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water." <sup>29</sup> "Come," he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. <sup>30</sup> But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" <sup>31</sup> Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" <sup>32</sup> And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. <sup>33</sup> Then those who were in the boat *worshiped him*, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Perhaps we open up and come together with "fear and trembling," uncertain of what lies ahead of us if we do. What we learn from the story of the storm is that Jesus has the storm under control, and Jesus has the words we need to walk on the water where he promises to meet us: "Come!" For us those will be moments of precious reunion. They will be celebrations of renewed worship, in service to God and to others. Then we are left with the mystery of Jesus' question, "Why did you doubt?" But we are also uplifted by the message of the disciples, "Truly you are the Son of God." There can be no better result of a new beginning for our church than the power of that confession. So we begin willingly and with worship.

**To God Be the Glory! Amen!**

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<sup>20</sup> Juliana M. Claassens in her "Exegetical Perspective" on John 12:1-11 from *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 2, Lent through Eastertide, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 209.

<sup>21</sup> Dawn (1999), 288.