

What have been some of the most important days in your lives? A wedding? A birth? A funeral? An adoption? A graduation? Try to remember all the effort you went through to get ready, and the motives behind such actions. How much did you spend, and even though it was likely more than you could really afford, didn't you feel it was that important?

Think about this moment John talks about in his Gospel. Jesus was close friends with Mary, Martha and their brother Lazarus. Lazarus had died suddenly and when Jesus showed up, he brought him back to life and gave him back to his family. Can you imagine the emotion and excitement at this party with Lazarus certainly being center of attention? An unexpected new life was ahead of them all! At the same time no one knew this would be last week of Jesus' life, as he was headed to Jerusalem and a cross!

The reality of this moment as they had Lazarus back but had no inkling, they would soon lose Jesus! Mary was so full of love and joy that her response to Jesus was understandable. How do you thank someone for giving a life back that was lost? Price was no object, she needed to surrender all she could as a way of showing her grateful love. What would you have done? There was no protocol or internet advice for such an occasion. She had to do something!

She chose perfume which was used in their community to cover the scent of dirty bodies or greasy hair. It was the task of a servant to wash dirty feet as that was beneath the dignity of anyone with any self-respect. A king of course would be anointed with oil on his head as a sign of his kingship. So, think about the irony of Mary anointing not only Jesus' head, but also his feet! There are so many messages in that act of a lavish outpouring of tears and love.

Mary assumed the role of a servant. Her gift was extraordinary and precious. In her mind it was the best thing she could think of for her rabbi and friend who had conquered death and restored her brother to life! This was lavish! It was sweet! This was incredible and over the top! It was unexpected! Memorable! It was a waste of what was so valuable for a moment in time.

And no one understood! Judas only saw the lost wealth wasted on expensive perfume. The leaders were scandalized by Jesus' willingness to allow this woman to wash his feet -- in public -- at a meal. This was all just so wrong! The disciples were confused, couldn't get the scent out of their noses, and maybe were just a little jealous that they had not thought of ever thanking Jesus for the many gifts he had shared with them.

Mary's anointing mirrored Jesus' foot washing. In between those two gestures is where we walk each and every day. The servant love of Jesus calls us to be

servants and foot washers in our own way. The gift of Mary's anointing calls us to pour out the lavish love of Jesus as a sign of our gratitude and faith.

What an object lesson as the sweet aroma of this selfless and humiliating act would leave a scent that would carry them through the week.

With all the conversation and commotion, it is no wonder the disciples were overwhelmed with the scent, and this overboard display of gratitude. It was more than they could comprehend. However, Jesus, did some healing of his own and softened the criticism by announcing that, "in fact, Mary is anointing me for my own death!" He used this moment to point them to a more important moment yet to come.

Perfume was also used as a lavish display of love to wash a body with before burying it. It covered the stench of death and anointed a body with love. Mary didn't know what was coming next, but Jesus did!

Do you realize how the meal moved from celebration, to confusion, to grief? But is Jesus journey from Bethlehem to Calvary any different than our own. From the joy of birth to the sorrow of the tomb – he walked where we walk.

And the next question, having figured out why this is such an important story in the Gospel of John, is what practical application it will have for you and me.

Most of you have dealt with the death of loved ones, and always the experience teaches why it is so important to prepare each other NOW! Why wait? Such a sweet surrender is result of such love. Why wait till later? Mary couldn't wait and did the best she could. Having been embraced by the love of Jesus himself, how can we do any less for each other?

A young woman undergoing chemo was overwhelmed with the love of her friends and asked "why is everyone treating me as if I am dying?" A wise friend told her, "we are all dying, we just forget to treat each other as if we are." What a gift that would be to the people around you – and especially those you love! Mary held nothing back, and serves as a model of what that friend was speaking of!

Consider how Jesus prepared us for his grace. He gave up the glory of heaven to be born in a manger and surrendered our most important gift, life itself, so that he could conquer the death which we fear the most. His preparations were all about loving surrender, and when he washed his disciples' feet, he was preparing them to understand how much they would gain from his love.

Faith offers us the opportunity to anoint each other by how we live. Faith calls us to surrender pride, ego and selfishness and humiliate ourselves through serving, giving, sharing, and reaching out. Such a foot washing love shows the power of the cross and empty tomb in your life and mine.

When the Roman Church elected the present pope, two things struck me as much as anything else. His choice of St. Francis, as an official name, proclaimed his humble roots. It announced a desire to wash feet, and to serve the common folk rather than be served with glitz and glamour.

Secondly, his first action from that balcony when he was presented to the crowds as Pope was to ask them to pray for him, and he bowed his head, the crowd accepted his gesture, and they anointed him with their silent prayers. That was his way of proclaiming a living surrender and servant love.

Jesus' entire ministry prepares us for death. Our life is about dining with Jesus. He has anointed us with his suffering and calls us to anoint his world. Are you ready to serve in such a lavish and embarrassingly loving way ... how can we look at cross and do any less? This is our sweet surrender, and what a powerful aroma it leaves in all that it touches. amen