

Grace & peace to you dear siblings in Christ.

Recently, I met with the Saint Paul Area Synod Congregational Vitality Team for a special session about our spiritual gifts. We began our time together with a game that fostered deep reflection and storytelling. We were given 2 questions to ponder:

What is the best gift that
you've ever received?

What is the best gift that
you've ever given?



**WHAT IS THE BEST GIFT
THAT YOU'VE EVER
RECEIVED?**

**WHAT IS THE BEST GIFT
THAT YOU'VE EVER
GIVEN?**

For both questions – the rules are the same. It has to be a real “gift.” Not like, “I gave my child life – there’s no better gift than that.” OR “meeting my wife.” We were even told “Jesus’ love and forgiveness is off-limits in this game.” I’d like to invite you to consider how you might answer these questions.

What is the best gift that you’ve ever received?

What is the best gift that you’ve ever given?

After we’d all come up with our answers, we began our game guessing who wrote what and telling stories. I noticed how themes emerged from what we shared.

The gift was always from or for someone who was incredibly dear – a family member, partner, or close friend. And another theme – the gifts were often “priceless” – they weren’t expensive luxury vacations. They were homemade or even salvaged items of deep personal meaning. They were well-researched or took some serious planning on the part of the giver. They were unexpected and couldn’t be reciprocated – often coming for no reason at all – except I knew you’d like this. As stories were shared – the people gathered lit up! This was a beautiful activity that filled our room with a palpable sense of joy and gratitude. We were basking in the power of love embodied in gifts. Love received and shared and grown.

Our story today from John has this same kind of sense of embodied love around an incredible gift. But we have to back up a bit to really understand where we are starting from. It is casually mentioned as our story begins that Jesus is eating with folks at the home of Lazarus, “whom was raised from the dead.” (like it’s not a big deal!). In chapter 11, just a handful of verses before today’s story, Jesus raised Lazarus **from the dead!** After becoming sick, and being in the tomb for 4 days. So, it’s no small matter that Lazarus is ‘hosting’ this meal with his two sisters Mary & Martha. The sisters both believed that Lazarus would not have died if Jesus would have simply been there. And they both endured the fog of shock and grief for days after Lazarus died ... **but, before** Jesus raised him from the dead. Can you imagine the roller-coaster of emotions those 3 siblings endured through Lazarus’ illness,

death, burial, and astonishing resurrection? They each have been transformed in life by their relationship with Jesus.¹

So what may sound like a simple dinner party with Jesus – is much much more! The once-was-dead-Lazarus is now the host. The recently “deceased-then-resurrected’s” sister Martha is the busy-body hostess providing and serving the meal, and then there’s sister Mary ... Mary provides this act of extravagant love embodied! In response to the amazing, life-changing, astonishing gift of a literal 2nd chance at life for her brother – Mary offers Jesus a gift of her own.

It's difficult to overstate the power and extravagance of Mary's gift to Jesus. She brings out **extremely expensive** perfumy ointment – to anoint Jesus' feet. Now she doesn't get a chance to say where she got it or why she has it or explain her reasoning for giving this gift. **But it is obvious** that her act of showing Jesus love was noticed in the room. The story only has 1 verse describing Mary's action – before several verses describing the re-action to her gift.² Despite Mary being a central character in this story, she seems on the periphery in some strange way. In this artwork by Niels Larsen



¹ Brian Peterson. Commentary on John 12:1-8, WorkingPreacher.org. Accessed 3/27/25.

² Emerson Powery. Commentary on John 12:1-8, WorkingPreacher.org. Accessed 3/27/25.

Stevns, Mary barely makes it into the picture – which honestly, matches the tone and attention of the scripture. In what follows Mary’s one-line of action, Judas Iscariot criticizes her wasteful spending – but Jesus defends her.

There is a deeper layer to the power of Mary’s gift – which is difficult for us to fully comprehend without some context. Anointing is not something that happens very much in our culture. It’s kind of a foreign concept – or if we’ve experienced it, most likely it’s been with a loved one during an illness or as they are actively dying. Anointing is certainly appropriate to use in blessing at such times – but in 1st century Palestine – everyone knew what this kind of anointing meant. It was a public and widely understood gesture.

There were “Two big events in ancient Palestine would call for an anointing like this: a coronation and a burial.”³ Mary’s extravagant anointing of Jesus doesn’t necessarily ‘fit’ what’s expected of either of these. A Jewish coronation would generally be done by the high priest **and** upon the person’s head. A burial, on the other hand, would include anointing the entire body and include tucking spices and perfumes into the binding clothes wrapping the body ... However, only **after** the person had died.⁴ But here, the way of Jesus doesn’t fit our expectations once

³ Lindsey S. Jodrey. Commentary on John 12:1-8, WorkingPreacher.org. Accessed 3/27/25.

⁴ Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, Jeffrey R. Chadwick, Frank F. Judd Jr., and Thomas A. Wayment, “Jesus and the Ossuaries: First-Century Jewish Burial Practices and the Lost Tomb of Jesus,” in Behold the Lamb of God: An Easter Celebration, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, Frank F. Judd Jr., and Thomas A. Wayment (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2008), 201–36. Accessed at <https://rsc.byu.edu/behold-lamb-god/jesus-ossuaries-first-century-jewish-burial-practices-lost-tomb-jesus>, 4/5/2025.

again. “This scene shows that Jesus is a king, **and** it shows that he is about to die.”⁵

Because of Mary’s incredible gift - “Jesus will enter Jerusalem as the Anointed One, but anointed not on his head, as we expected for a king, but on his feet. He is anointed not by the high priest but by a woman. Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem and his identity as Messiah will not fit neatly into any preconceived expectations.”⁶

As we’ll see in a couple of weeks, soon Jesus will perform a similar act of love – in getting down on his knees and lovingly washing the feet of the disciples. But Mary! Her act of extravagant love embodied is lived



out ... “in service **even before the command is given**. ‘The power of the witness of Mary’s discipleship in this story is that she knows how to respond to Jesus without being told. She fulfills Jesus’ love commandment before he even teaches it.’”⁷

⁵ Lindsey S. Jodrey.

⁶ Brian Peterson. Commentary on John 12:1-8, WorkingPreacher.org. Accessed 3/27/25.

⁷ Brian Peterson (includes author’s quote of Gail R. O’Day.)

Mary, who barely makes it into the some of the artwork depicting this amazing moment, is a **prophetic announcer** of Jesus kingdom coming ... it's just around the corner. Our story today shows us she is an underestimated disciple who shows us what following Jesus is **really** about and who embodies Christ-like love lived **out loud**. (not timidly hidden away in secret). It's hard to overstate how powerful Mary's example of discipleship truly is. She has a stop-and-take-notice way of following Jesus.

"For Mary, the cost of the sacrifice was irrelevant."⁸ She offered an AMAZING gift – it was personalized, it was inexplicably appropriate for what was to come for Jesus. It seems to me that she understood what Jesus was about on an entirely different level than most of the other disciples. Her love poured out - **literally filled the room** and created a moment for those gathered to take notice and pay attention to Jesus. **She embodied the untamed love of Jesus** and generously shared it.

Iconographer Mary Jane Miller describes this scene with Mary, "There are thousands of ways to waste money, but love is never wasted."⁹

⁸ Emerson Powery.

⁹ Mary Jane Miller. "Extravagant Love: Commentary by the Artist" Vanderbilt University Divinity Library. Accessed at <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/diglib-fulldisplay.pl?SID=20250405408803473&code=act&RC=59683&Row=19>. 4/5/2025.

Love is a gift from God.

May you boldly share this gift like Mary - and not waste the extravagant love we've received from Jesus. Thanks be to God.