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The Real Last Supper

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John 12:1-11

[Mary Anoints Jesus]

¹² 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."

[The Plot to Kill Lazarus]

⁹ When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰ So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, ¹¹ since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

Six days before the Passover was John's way of saying: six days before Jesus' passion. Six days before his humiliation. Six days before his arrest, trial, torture, and crucifixion. Six days before his agonizing, slow death. Six days before all that, Jesus was having dinner in the home of the three people who knew him best and loved him most. His disciples were also there.

In the group of fifteen people there with Jesus, I believe four knew what would happen in six days. Judas knew, because he was involved in the conspiracy already in motion, described in the last verses of the Scripture passage. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus knew, because Jesus had told them. All of it. I believe they knew, and that they'd planned this evening accordingly. That this dinner in Bethany, six days before the Passover, was the **real** Last Supper.

Martha served the meal – naturally. Lazarus sat quietly, which is what he always does in the story. And Mary brought out the gift. A pound of perfume, worth a working person's year's wages. About \$23,000 today, according to the Monroe County Living

Wage index. She opened it and poured it out on Jesus' feet, then used her hair as a towel to wipe up the excess.

The disciples might have closed their eyes, but there was no way not to smell what was happening. Every disciple but Judas was speechless – for good reason. Mary literally abandoned ALL social decorum. She behaved nothing short of indecent. Husbands and wives didn't behave like this in front of others. Married people now don't behave like this in front of others. Loosing her hair amounted to starting to undress. Touching his feet was . . . intimate, to say the least.

Judas broke the spell with his stupid remark about the poor. Stupid, since he cared nothing about the poor. But I feel a smudge of sympathy for him, because I've done the same – in a moment so embarrassing and nervous, when I'm terrified I might laugh, that instead I blurt out any stupid thing just to break the tension.

But Jesus didn't cut him any slack. "*Leave her alone!*" He said, "*She's doing what she can to prepare for my death.*" Alfred Edersheim called Jesus' defense of her *an unspeakable pathos and the depth of self-abasement*, to see Jesus defend Mary for treating him with kindness against Judas for pretending to care for the poor. (Book ii, pg.259)

It is true, the more time I spend in the text the more convinced I become that Mary, Martha and Lazarus knew why Jesus was going to Jerusalem and exactly what would happen there. And they chose to be the friends he needed as well as the followers he called.

They neither argued nor interfered. Instead, they decided what they would do to ease him into this horror, and to thank him for the friend he had been to them. Whom do you know best and love most in the world? Who calls you *best friend* and your house *home*? And if you only had six more days and one more supper together with that friend, what would you hold back for some other **more** special occasion?

If you were Lazarus, what would you own that was **too good** for Jesus? For all we know, they mortgaged their house to buy this perfume. It **was** money. It absolutely was money! But not just money. I watch Mary do this crazy act – this public undressing – and it seems to me she is, in her own way, joining him in his humiliation. Casting her lot with his. Giving up all that is respectable and nice, for the sake of knowing Him and being known by Him, as deeply and as closely as possible in this life.

Originally I thought I'd preach the Philippians passage (Philippians 3:4b-14), where Paul says,

⁸ I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him.

But like us, Paul only ever knew Christ Risen, while Jesus was Mary, Martha, and Lazarus' friend: their living, breathing, sleeping, eating, weeping, true companion. And it seems to me, as lost things go, a true companion is a much bigger thing to lose than one's reputation. Or even \$23,000.00.

What they have in common, I think – Paul and Mary and Martha and Lazarus – is a taste of life in Christ, a taste which spoiled their taste for lesser things – for lesser life, if you will. Paul referred to the lesser things as *rubbish*, a wildly sanitized translation of the Greek. *Dog poo* is less, but a still sanitized translation that few English versions choose.

It wasn't theology for Mary, Martha, and Lazarus yet, but rather an impending horror which they could only watch their friend endure – and love him as best they could, holding nothing back.

Would you pray with me?