

The Church Smells

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

23 October 2022

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: Psalm 119:33-37 & 72
John 12:1-11

"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."

~ John 12:3

Prayer

Holy God,

Open our minds to your Word.

Turn our hearts to the Gospel.

Give us new understanding

That we may be doers and not merely hearers of your holy teachings.

In the name of Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit

We make this prayer. Amen.

Every October, we set the fourth Sunday aside to talk about stewardship. If you are visiting us today, let me say upfront that I am delighted that you are here and I hope you will come back next Sunday, but this morning we will talk about percentages, the budget and money, so be patient and bear with me.

Our journey to this morning often begins on the first Sunday of the month when one of our brave church members, usually a trustee, stands before the congregation to speak about ACC's needs and your opportunity and responsibility to support the church. Every week thereafter, church members lead a "Moment for Stewardship" each Sunday, like the one Pam and Tom Gillispie led a few minutes ago, inviting all of us to reflect on why we give our time and money faithfully to keep Acton Congregational Church alive, vibrant, engaged, practicing the extravagant welcome of Christ, serving our neighbors, praying for our enemies, deepening our faith, and witnessing to the love of God revealed in Christ in a world that has changed dramatically over the last two-and-a-half years. All those "Moments for Stewardship" are meant to prepare us for this very day when the preacher musters up courage, takes a deep breath and comes right out asking the people in the pews as well as those who worship with us virtually to fill out a pledge card and make a serious and generous monetary commitment to sustain what we believe God is doing in and through our congregation.

From a purely financial viewpoint, Stewardship Sunday may be described as the church's approach to fundraising. To be completely honest, it does take a lot of money to maintain this building where we gather weekly to contemplate holy things; where Liz, Pip,

the choir and the bell choir make beautiful music that lift our spirit and take our thoughts a little closer to the divine; and where, from time to time, I hope, you hear thought-provoking and spiritually nurturing sermons. It is from this building that we livestream our services that continue to reach people far beyond our walls. It is to this building that we are slowly returning to enjoy the in-person fellowship and retreats and potluck lunches and youth gatherings and concerts and book studies and Sunday school classes that connect us and enliven our sense of community. Here we share our joys and sorrows and pray for each other. In this building, we huddle around the Bible every week to learn how to forgive, welcome strangers, practice justice, stand up for peace, follow Christ and live lives that defy the conventional wisdom of the world. Every single dollar that you pledge is invested right back into this building and also into programs and ministries and service opportunities and mission initiatives that allow us to live out the Covenant that we adopted at our last Annual Meeting.

Our Covenant, which we will recite later in the service, is a good reminder that stewardship is not just about meeting the trustees' request for an increase of 6% in our pledges to balance next year's budget. You pledge faithfully because this congregation embodies our most cherished values, empowers us to take our faith seriously not only on Sunday morning but seven days a week, and equips us to care for humanity and for our planet. Stewardship Sunday helps us to remember that we give our money to ACC not only because of what we get out of this building, out of our staff and out of our ministries, but because here we are reminded every Sunday of our collective desire to manage our lives, our time, our resources, our investments, our skills, our gifts, and our priorities wisely so that we may offer God our very best. The late Peter Gomes, who served at Harvard Memorial Church for almost 40 years, once said very courageously that our monetary gift to the Church ought to be a gift that makes a difference in our finances and not a symbolic donation.¹ If we do not miss our pledge at all, Rev. Gomes noted, it does not represent our best stewardship, because stewardship is not about raising money for the operating budget. Stewardship is about doing the extraordinary, the unexpected, the unreasonable, the seemingly wasteful, and the excessively generous act of giving our very best to fulfill the greatest commandment on which the Law, the prophets and everything the church does hang, that is, to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

There is a song in the classic Hollywood Technicolor musical *"My Fair Lady"* entitled *"Show Me"* that wormed its way into my brain last week as I was thinking about Stewardship Sunday. The lyrics, which came to life on the screen in the voice of soprano Marni Nixon who dubbed the vocals for Audrey Hepburn, are almost as familiar as the Gospel story I read today –

***"Words! Words! Words!
I'm so sick of words!...
If you're in love,
Show me!..."***

***Don't talk of love
Lasting through time.
Make me no undying vow....
Don't waste my time...
Show me now!"²***

In a nutshell, this is the whole message of stewardship – don't talk about faith, don't talk about being faithful, don't talk about values, don't talk about giving, don't talk about supporting the church, don't talk about loving God. Show it! Show it by volunteering! Show it by showing up for worship! Show it all when you bring your pledge to church next Sunday. Simply open your hearts, open your hands, be generous with your time and money and show the best of your stewardship.

Our Stewardship Team and I chose to anchor our Stewardship theme in Mary's uncalculated, extravagant, expensive, aromatic and heartfelt gift to Jesus because Mary once again chooses the better part and no one can take that away from her.³ Mary's act of love requires no words. John describes it in one single verse, "***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.***"

No one, not even Jesus himself, was expecting such public and borderline inappropriate display of devotion, faith, friendship, and love. It had been a while since Martha, Mary and Lazarus had seen Jesus. In fact, the last time they were all together, Jesus wept at Lazarus' tomb and then shouted him out of death, restoring his friend to full life.⁴ The word about the rising of Lazarus had spread like wildfire. The Gospel of John claims that people started to believe that there was something special about Jesus, something from God that not even death could hold back or keep down. The exciting rumors about the young Galilean teacher who revived a dead man only two miles from Jerusalem eventually reached the ears of Caiaphas, the Chief Priest. In a hastily called meeting of the supreme council, the religious authorities in Jerusalem decided that Jesus posed a real political risk for the whole nation, especially during the Festival of Passover that was only a few days away. The only solution they could come up with was to eliminate the threat. Caiaphas justified their decision not on religious, but on political grounds: it would be better for a man to die than the whole nation to be destroyed by the Romans.⁵ And just like that, Jesus became the most wanted man in the city. Anyone who saw him should report his whereabouts immediately so the authorities could seize Jesus and stop him from stirring up more trouble permanently.⁶

When Jesus sat at the dinner table, Mary could see in his face, in his eyes, and in his quiet and somber demeanor that Jesus knew that his days on earth were numbered. As a someone who was part of Jesus' inner circle of friends, Mary probably had at least an inkling of Jesus' intention to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey the next day. She could sense that the threat of death cast a pall of uncertainty, sadness, and even fear over the reunion with Jesus. Rather than waiting for a more opportune time to show her love for

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Jesus, Mary took the clay jar with the high-priced nard and, without saying a word, she prostrated herself next to Jesus and poured the perfume, every single drop of it, on his feet. And as if her behavior had not been shocking enough, while the sharp scent of spikenard filled the room and slowly wafted through the house, Mary let her hair down in a room full of men – something no respectable woman would do – and she wiped Jesus' feet with her own hair. Mary knew intuitively what poet James Russell Lowell captured in poetry –

***“Not what we give, but what we share,
The gift without the giver is bare.”⁷***

Judas could not hold his tongue as he watched Mary's odd, overly emotional, embarrassing and downright bizarre behavior. He was after all in charge of the disciples' finances and, as a good bookkeeper that is in sync with the conventional wisdom of this world, Judas had a perfectly reasonable question: ***“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?”***

New Testament commentaries remind us that pure nard was a perfume from the Himalayas that adjusted to today's market value could fetch as much as \$45,000 dollars. In the first century, this was a whole lot of money. A poor worker and his family could live well and not worry at all about their daily bread an entire year with 300 denarii. And yet, rather than keeping the jar of costly sweet-smelling nard safe or giving it away to support the nascent Jesus movement or selling it to feed the poor in her own village as Judas suggested since Bethany means *“house of misery”*⁸ and the funds raised from the nard's sale in the open market could put bread on the plate of every single person afflicted by hunger in town, Mary blew it all on Jesus' feet. The evangelist tries to play down Judas' objection by pointing out that he skimmed cash off the top of the money donated to the disciples' common purse, still Judas' question sounds prudent, thoughtful, rational and reasonable – ***“Why not put such valuable asset to good use?” “Why not make all the money count for something that can make a difference in the life of the poor?”*** Jason Micheli said in his podcast *“Crackers and Grape Juice,”* that most of us think quietly and ashamedly, because nobody wants to agree with Judas, that ***“Judas is right on the money about the money. Considering the cost of nard, it would be better to rub Jesus down with some \$5.99 Old Spice and give the remaining \$44,990 dollars for do-gooding. [Because] doing good is what [Jesus and the Church are] about, right?”***⁹

Surprisingly, Jesus, who was poor and had spent the last three years of his public ministry healing the poor, feeding the hungry, and had a lot to say about economic disparity in his society, took Mary's and not Judas' side. ***“Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”*** I love what a professor of Religious Studies wrote about this short verse that does make mainline Protestant Christians like you and me who are passionate about social justice feel a tad uncomfortable every time we hear it read out loud in worship. What Jesus told Judas is that there are some occasions in life when what counts is not *“the greatest good for the greatest number”* but ***“faithful and self-giving***

love for those closest to us while there is still time. It is often easier to love 'humankind' or 'the poor' or 'the oppressed' in the abstract than to show our love concretely for family who live under the same roof or friends who eat with us at the same table¹⁰ or people who worship with us in the same church but voted for the other party.

Stewardship, friends, is about loving concretely. It is about risking ridicule from people who cannot quite understand why we still choose to pour our hearts and our money into this building and everything that happens within these walls. But you know that this place is much more than an organized pile of stones, bricks and wood. You know that every Sunday, we come here and the Gospel of Jesus Christ inspires us to become the better versions of ourselves that God created us to be. You know that 10% of our annual budget is given to other organizations and mission partners, so our pledges are put to good use not just in this building but in places and communities near and far. You know that ACC cannot rely on investment income to keep the lights on, the staff paid and the programs running. Our investment committee keeps a close watch on our investment funds, but like every institution in this country ACC has seen a significant decrease in the market value of our funds. The roughly \$560 thousand dollars we are hoping to raise will not give us extra money, but the essential money we need to translate the words of our Covenant into concrete acts of faith and Christian witness.

So friends, I ask you this morning to throw caution to the wind, break open your jar of pure nard, and pour out the perfume of your love, your faith, your money and your life into our church. Don't talk about faithful living. Show it. Love all the people who worship and serve and volunteer at ACC concretely. Even though the conventional wisdom of the world tells us to be worried about inflation, concerned about the market, conservative about giving, be like Mary. Let the abundance of your love for God and for the teachings of Christ move you to be surprisingly and unreasonably generous.

Frederick Buechner noted that the Church ***"is destroyed not just from without by a world that sees it as a dead-end street but by people like you and me who destroy it from within by our deadness and staleness, our failure to be brave, to be human, to take chances."***¹¹

Friends, the only way to keep ACC alive as we emerge from the worst days of the pandemic is by being brave and even reckless like Mary. The only way to overcome the smell of deadness and staleness is by overpowering it with the fragrance of our love for God, for Jesus and for one another. Remember that Jesus sided with Mary, and he will be on our side too as we show our love not only in the amount of money we give, but also in the amount of our time we are willing to share with ACC, because, remember, ***"The gift without the giver is bare."***

I invite you to stand now and join our Church Moderator Janette Blackburn in owning the Covenant that embodies what we believe we are called to show in and through

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this building and our ministries. Pay close attention to each sentence in our Covenant for these brief statements empower us to love God and our neighbors concretely. Then take the bulletin home and before you fill out your pledge card, read these words out loud again, for they hold us true to our desire to spread the sweet and powerful smell of God's love not just in this building but out in the world.

¹ I no longer have the original text. Cited by memory.

² Show Me, lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner, music by Frederick Loewe, 1956.

³ Luke 10:42.

⁴ John 11:43.

⁵ John 11:50.

⁶ John 11:57.

⁷ Quoted by William Sloane Coffin in The Gift Without the Giver is Bare, The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin, The Riverside Years, Vol. 1, p. 125.

⁸ James Strong in Comprehensive Strong Dictionary of the Bible, loc. 80608 [Kindle Edition].

⁹ Cited in Journal for Preachers, by Will Willimon in "Virtual Signal" John 12:1-8, p. 31, Vol. XLV, Number 1, Advent 2021.

¹⁰ By J. Ramsey Michaels in John 12:1-11, Interpretation, 43, Number 3, pp. 288-289.

¹¹ Frederick Buechner in A Room Called Remember, Dereliction, loc. 1699 [Kindle Edition].