

Have you ever been in a situation
where you wanted to help someone?
Maybe it was a neighbor, a co-worker,
or maybe a friend who lost someone they loved.
You wanted to do something,
anything to show them you care.
Maybe you decided to send a text or make a phone call.
Maybe your thing is bringing over food
or getting food delivered.
Many a heart has been helped to heal by a good casserole.
But we know these acts of love and compassion
were never about the casserole.
They are food offerings to give us a way
to connect with those in need.

Maybe you have received your own food offering
as you have walked through the valley of the shadow of death
of a loved one or journeyed through
the wilderness after a surgery.
Friends, church family, and neighbors brought you food.
These offerings can make a big difference in our lives.

Jesus is gathered with his closest friends
beyond the 12 disciples, Lazarus, Mary, and Martha, in John 12.
They are gathering together to celebrate.
But what are they celebrating?

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.

Well, it's nothing major really.
In John's gospel, Jesus has just raised Lazarus from the dead.
So dead for a while that his sisters were concerned
when they opened his grave, what would come out of it.
And they are gathering around the table in preparation
for the defining meal of the Jewish faith, Passover.
Passover was less than a week away, and,
like a master storyteller, John is just building
the tension toward Jesus' final days.

2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him.

Imagine the scene with me:

Jesus and the disciples are reclining
at Lazarus's home, and Martha is serving.

We have heard in Luke that Martha
was in the habit of doing such things.

What a week it has been in their lives together.

It is probably not every week that someone anyone
is raised from the dead in Bethany.

But Jesus knew he was in trouble.

He had just created a big big disturbance in the force.

The forces that were against him were so upset
that they were ready to end him and his ministry.

Jesus had taken a risk coming to Bethany
to heal his friend in this small town.

And if this were a good old western,
there would be a lynching mob at Lazarus's door right now.

So, there is tension at this dinner party before Passover.

Have you ever experienced tension at a family gathering?

Your uncle decides to tell you all like it really is.

Your prodigal cousin decides to show up and surprise everyone.

But that is nothing like the surprise that is going to happen tonight.

3 Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus's feet, and wiped them with her hair.

Mary, who usually sits at the feet of Jesus listening,
decided to offer Jesus an extravagant gift.

She gently lifts a pound of nard perfume and anoints
Jesus with it.

And guess what the word for anointed here really means?

It is the same word used when
talking about preparing a body for burial.

The same exact way that Lazarus was anointed with
Aloe, spices, and perfume for his burial just days ago.

Mary anointed Jesus for burial,

whether that was her intention or not,
and it did not cut down the tension in the room.

Here is a woman, a follower and friend of Jesus,
who touched Jesus' feet with her hair in an act of intimacy.

Have you ever been part of a foot washing during Holy Week?
It is a humbling, intimate experience letting someone
touch your toes with their hands and wash them. And it says...

The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume

The offering was spikenard imported from the mountains of India.
It's an expensive offering, valued at 300 denarii.
A denarius was a common worker's daily wage.
We are talking minimum wage,
but still worth an entire year's salary.
That's a lot of money for a traveling group of people
living off the generosity of others.
And it apparently smelled to high heaven.

I can remember those strong perfumes and colognes
that were really popular in high school and college years,
so late 80's, early 90's, like the green glass Polo or Obsession.
Boy, those were strong.
Have you or a pet ever met a skunk?

**Pure nard was intended to be used sparingly
to mask the odors of everyday life.**

What do you think happens when a person
takes an entire pound, 16 oz. of pure nard
and pours it out on Jesus's feet?
Maybe it starts to spill across the floor, splashing everywhere.
The aroma filled the entire room.
The scent would have been overwhelming.

I have so many questions.
Why would Mary do this?
Mary doesn't seem desperate here, but
rather shamelessly poured an extravagant offering onto Jesus.
Was she grateful for her brother's healing?
Or she just didn't know what else to do?
Jesus will tell us later that she bought the perfume. How?
Were Mary and Martha women of means?
Did they own their own business?
What if this was her dowry for a marriage that never came,
that she was pouring over Jesus' feet
as a sign of her commitment to him,

no matter what lies ahead?
Mary seems to be all in.

But what about the disciples?
Did they laugh, groan, or praise Mary?
What were the disciples' initial reactions?
We don't know. Maybe they were stunned.
All but one, that is. Good ole Judas.

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?"

I know we want to come down on Judas hard,
but isn't Judas just asking what others in the room and we were wondering?

Yes, PJ, but it clearly says this disclaimer about his motives

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.)

To my mind, I don't know if that makes a lot of sense.
Maybe the writer of John needed to suggest a reason
that Judas would later betray Jesus because,
to his readers' minds, it would be unthinkable
and unjustifiable that Judas would betray him.

How many times have we had a friend,
or co-worker, or spouse, or even ourselves,
where someone's or our actions or behavior were misinterpreted,
or maybe they were justified, and because of it,
we were looked at them a certain way,
no matter what we said or did from that point forward.
But sometimes humans can just be humans
getting caught up in making bad choices.

And we religious types act like somehow, we never do.
But if we were to go around the room,
I think we would all find that we have
made a bad choice or two in our lives.
And usually, we will give ourselves the benefit of the doubt
by saying something like We are only _____ after all.

But it sounds like Jesus has had a long week
and just wanted to enjoy some time with his friends.

He doesn't need another controversy in his life to deal with.

I mean, in our world, doesn't it seem like
there isn't a day that goes by without
another controversy, another debate,
another division, another disagreement?

Can't we all get along for just one day?

Finally, Jesus has said, "Enough is enough."

7 Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it[b] 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."

What does Jesus mean by this?

Some use it as a justification for not caring for the poor.

This is not Jesus telling us to ignore the vulnerable.

Everyone in that room would have heard that

Jesus was quoting **Deuteronomy 15:11** from the Old Testament.

The Old Testament consistently encouraged and
challenged the faithful to care for the foreigner,
the widow, and the orphan among us.

Jesus had a deep passion for caring for the vulnerable.

And whether Judas is being truthful or disingenuous,
this is not really about serving the poor.

This is about a Jesus who needed to be prepared for burial
and to ease the tension in his body
as he makes his way to Jerusalem now.

**What do we get from all of this? No matter how you look at it, it was an unlikely offering
Mary gave to Jesus.**

Maybe you have given Jesus an unlikely
offering at some time in your life, too.

You have paid it forward to someone
in line at Starbucks or at a drive-thru.

Helped someone out when they didn't have
enough to pay for something,
or their card wasn't working.

Random or not-so-random acts of kindness.

Sometimes that becomes a Jesus' story, right?

Those times when we have heard a story

**I think that is what we offered our community
this week in our partnership with the Friends of Nolensville Parks.**

Maybe that was Jesus' point:
that this unlikely offering from Mary was over the top,
and that he was trying to get them to see it
as a demonstration of God's love and grace beyond measure.
And that, like Mary, we can offer God our offerings
(like we did on Ash Wednesday) and others through our generosity.
And what would that look like? Our unlikely offering?

How can you use your spiritual gifts, talents, skills, abilities,
or your passions in unexpected ways to bless the world?
We are told the beauty of an unlikely offering is that
it catches the world off guard. It does not follow
the rules of efficiency or practicality; rather,
an unlikely offering comes from within.

We are invited this Lent to offer
Jesus and the world our very best.
Our unlikely offering does not have to be perfect.
Like Mary of Bethany, the offering just
has to come from a willing heart.

So, as we begin this Lent season once again,
what if we explore what our own unlikely offerings might be?
What do you have in your hands, your home,
your heart that can be poured out as a gift?
If you are reading *An Unlikely Lent*,
it offers some ideas for discerning what to do...

Set aside time each day this week to meditate on the question:
What is my unlikely offering?
Write about your skills, resources, or acts of love that
may seem small or unconventional,
but you could use it to bless others.
Perhaps it's an act of generosity that doesn't make sense
to everyone, but speaks volumes in the kingdom of God.
What will be your unlikely offering during Lent?