

## LEAVE HER ALONE!

A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 21, 2010

Text: John 12:1-8

In chapter eleven of John, just before today's Gospel, we read the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus was the brother of Martha and Mary. They lived in Bethany, two miles outside of Jerusalem. Closer than Glendale Mall is from here.

The day Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead was the last straw for the authorities in Jerusalem. From that day, John tells us,

they planned to put Jesus to death. He therefore no longer walked about openly among the Judeans, but went from there to a town called Ephraim in the region near the wilderness; and he remained there with the disciples. Now the Passover of the Judeans was near, and many went up . . . to Jerusalem . . . They were looking for Jesus and were asking one another as they stood in the temple, "What do *you* think? Surely he will not come to the festival, will he?" Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that *anyone* who knew where Jesus was should let them know, so that they might arrest him.

Well, among the many people who *did* know where Jesus was were Mary and Judas. What did Mary do? Call the authorities? No, she and her sister gave a dinner for Jesus and his friends.

At dinner, Mary did an extraordinary thing. She took a whole pound of expensive perfumed oil, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair.

Judas Iscariot criticized her. He put a negative spin on her extravagant gesture. "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" According to Luke's account of this event, Judas wasn't the only one who was thinking that way.

Then Jesus said . . . "Leave her alone."

"Leave her alone." I like it.

Please notice that before Jesus addressed the content of Judas's question, he spoke to the mean-spirited motivation. Judas was putting Mary down, and showing off. Of course, he wasn't offering to give away any of his own money, but he was very high-minded about what other people should do with their money. (Not to mention that, as John claims, he was also embezzling.) Jesus was not going to let Judas get away with that.

I like that sentence—"Leave her alone"—so I studied it a bit. In Greek the verb is an elastic one, with many uses and meanings. In some contexts it could mean "Divorce her." Literally, it means "Send her away." But Jesus is not telling them to send Mary away. He is defending her.

Luther interpreted it as "*Lass sie mit Frieden!*" Leave her in *peace*. The French translate the phrase using the word *tranquille*, as in "tranquility." The English phrase "leave her alone" seems to imply that Judas, by picking on her as he did, had caused her to be apprehended, at least in the imaginations of those present. You could say he had targeted Mary, and Jesus was saying "Hold your fire!" Mary was being accused, and Jesus said "Acquit her."

I like the power in the simple command of Jesus, "Leave her alone."

Had she done something wrong? Well, in a way Judas was correct. It is possible that when Judas said "this was a big waste," Mary herself was among those who agreed with him. She may have caught her breath, and suffered a pang of regret. She knew how critical Jesus was of rich people like herself, and of

extravagance, and injustice. Jesus didn't praise people very often, especially for their behavior. He was unpredictable. He was silent as wealthy people put large gifts in the treasury, then he praised a widow who put in a trivial amount. So Mary might well have felt ashamed when Judas pointed out her fault to Jesus.

But Jesus said: "Leave her alone." And they did.

Then Jesus recast what Mary had done, disagreeing with Judas's spin. I think he was not so much reading Mary's mind as showing how her actions could be seen in a kinder light that was also prophetic: "She bought this perfume so that she might keep it for the day of my burial."

But even this was also a way of saying to Judas, and everyone else: "Leave her alone." He was not just defending a certain way of acting; he was protecting a person.

This is the Jesus to whom we pray each Sunday, "Help, save, comfort, and defend us, O Lord," at the close of the Kyrie.

When our sins are forgiven for Jesus' sake, when the grace of God is announced to all of us, when we take the Sacrament after hearing that Jesus' blood was shed "for the forgiveness of sin," this is what we are hearing: "Leave her alone." "Leave him alone." Jesus defends us with this word of peace, and stills our accusers and critics, including even God himself!

I am not saying that everything we do equates to a sweet-smelling offering to God. On the contrary. Many of the things we do every day are wrong. A lot are ambiguous—we're not entirely sure. But all of them are subject to the criticism of other people, and of God's law. God accuses us? That is quite a burden to bear. Sometimes it makes us feel defeated, as if—like Mary—you can't win for losing. Who leads the perfect life?

So, what *does* God make of the lives we lead? In God's view, where do we stand? What is the bottom line? Jesus tells us the bottom line is God's viewpoint of mercy. If we are willing to leave the judging of our lives to God, and not keep it in our own hands, God will protect us as Jesus shielded Mary, saying "Leave her alone." And as Jesus sheltered others: Zaccheus, the woman caught in adultery, people with leprosy, blind people, tax collectors, the disreputable, the demon possessed, and so on. People who until they met Jesus were frozen in the headlights of the law.

When I pronounce the benediction at the end of the service, I hope you experience it as God's answer to our Kyrie. We begin the service by saying "Help, save, comfort, and defend us, O Lord," and in the end, at the benediction, we hear that he will.

The Lord bless you and keep you;  
The Lord's face shine on you with grace and mercy;  
The Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace.

In between, both Word and Sacrament tell us that because of Jesus, God says: "Leave them alone. They're with me."

But God does not then literally leave us *alone*. Actually, the forgiveness of sins is the start of something in us, because it sets us free, "sends us away." **When God's people are released through the forgiveness of our sins from the burden (as Judas saw it) of making God happy, they become free (as Mary saw it) to please God.**

And now we are getting to the point. I wonder if there isn't in every disciple a bit of Mary and a bit of Judas. The Mary in us just wants to express our devotion to God and our love of other people out of the fullness of our hearts. But the Judas in us wants to make sure other people see how good we are in the process.

Let me give as an example how this sin works in me, since none of you has given me permission to use you as an example of a sinner. Yet.

As a pastor, I love to serve you with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, preaching and teaching and so on. That is the Mary in me. But as a Felde, I am also very attuned to trying to make you happy with the way I do all that. I want to be best, like when I was winning spelling bees, as if that proved something. That is the Judas in me, and it often threatens to undermine the work that is also my joy.

Since sincerity and integrity are necessary ingredients of perfect ministry, I would be just another darned hypocrite, if I were left to my own to sort this one out. But Jesus says to the Judas in me, "leave him alone; let him work." And because I can trust Jesus to work this out, I am free to enjoy serving you.

The same distinction applies to all our worship, all the ways we serve one another, all the ways we help the poor, all the good we do. If we were pure "Mary," we could freely love and serve God and others without counting the cost. But we are partly "Judas," so sometimes we check to see if others are looking. Especially, we hope God is noticing when we are good.

We can't solve this by pouring on the sincerity, or even by giving extravagant gifts to God. All we can do is what Mary did, that other time Jesus came to their home. Sit at Jesus' feet, and learn from him that God has our outcomes covered, that God will cover all we do wrong, and will glory in whatever we offer him.

