

Sermon Notes: April 6, 2025
Focus: More Mary, Less Judas

[Lectionary Readings](#)

In John 12, Mary of Bethany—sister of Martha and the newly resurrected Lazarus—stands as a woman of remarkable self-possession. Her anointing of Jesus is not an act of self-abasement but of bold adoration and not wallowing in shame. She pours out costly perfume, unconcerned with Judas' grumbling.

Jesus had just raised her brother from the dead—an event that, in John's Gospel, changes everything. He loved Lazarus and went to Bethany to save him, despite the danger. John's account presents a striking sequence: after Lazarus' resurrection, Jesus dines in Bethany, Mary anoints him in gratitude, and the very next day, Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey which sets the stage for Jesus' final confrontation with the authorities.

For John, the raising of Lazarus is the turning point broadly and personally. Lazarus' family and friends gather to celebrate his restored life, but Judas seethes at Mary's extravagant generosity. In this moment, wealth is used not for personal gain but as an offering of love. The cracks between Judas and Jesus are becoming visible. John makes sure that we know the truth about Judas: he wasn't concerned for the poor—he was a thief, looking out for himself.

A Note on three Marys in the New Testament

(Please challenge me—I could be wrong. But even if I'm not!)

Mary of Bethany (John 12), the unnamed sinful woman (Luke 7), and Mary Magdalene are not the same person. I preached on this exactly three years ago—Fifth Sunday in Lent, 2022 and a few of you thought I was wrong.

Yet, I remain firmly in the more-than-one-Mary camp. This conflation of multiple women served a medieval church that preferred women to remain meek.

The Western Church—especially through Pope Gregory the Great—blurred these women into a single, flattened image: a fallen woman in need of redemption.

The "Sinful Woman" in Luke 7 – Luke describes a woman, known as a sinner, anointing Jesus' feet with tears and oil in a Pharisee's house. Tradition may blur the lines, but the Bible does not.

Two Jars, Two Anointings You might argue that two separate anointings must be a retelling of the same event. But the ancient world had customs that seem unique to us yet were not one-offs. One woman anointed Jesus in a Pharisee's house out of repentance. Another anointed him in Bethany out of love and gratitude. These are not the same stories, and they are not the same woman.

Mary of Bethany and the Anointing – In John 12, Mary of Bethany anoints Jesus' feet in gratitude for her brother's return from the dead. That's a vastly different *vibe* than a sinful woman weeping at Jesus' feet in gratitude.

Mary Magdalene's Role – Mary Magdalene is a central figure in the Gospels and the Gospel of Mary. The "Pretty Woman-ification" of Christian history—where women must grovel before they can be redeemed—serves a narrow and limiting view of women's roles in the church.

The Eastern Church never conflated these three women. Liturgical reforms—like the Roman Missal of 1970—acknowledge this, with Mary Magdalene's feast on July 22 and Mary of Bethany sharing July 29 with Lazarus and Martha.

The Self-Possession of Mary

Enough wrangling with the weeds. We often see Jesus as the hero, but in this moment, Mary of Bethany stands out—a figure of extraordinary courage, heart, and personal integrity. Her joy gives her the backbone to be generous, even as Judas grumbles in the background.

Stepping out in faith can mean doing something wonderful and special. But don't expect applause. No heartfelt gift is immune to criticism. Mary of Bethany likely heard Judas' complaints, but her self-possession kept her focused on blessing Jesus. May we do the same. The voices of complaint will always be there, but the generosity of your spirit speaks louder.

I remember when we started Christmas caroling in our Houston neighborhood years ago. One church member threw herself into it—baking cookies, rallying neighbors, mapping out neighbors' doors to knock on. The result? A throng of Christmas light bedazzled families—adults, teens, and little ones—trudging through the neighborhood, singing boldly to our amused and willing audience.

Our final stop was her home, where a fire crackled and hot chocolate steamed. It was wonderful. But, of course, some church members grumbled: *Why didn't we do X, Y, or Z instead? The hot chocolate should have been Ghirardelli's.* Blah, blah, blah. She was heartbroken. I tried to cheer her up, but the weight of criticism lingered.

I want to practice self-giving devotion, with God's help. I want joy to be protected, with God's help. And I want others to be shielded in the way I could not shield her.

More Mary, Less Judas

Negative comments will shake us. We'll get caught up in the drama. But Mary of Bethany's joy—her reunion with her brother—was something she refused to shrink from. The joy of being a blessing won't insulate us, but it will give us the resilience to endure.

Brené Brown writes: *"Joy is the most vulnerable emotion we experience. If you cannot tolerate joy, you start dress-rehearsing tragedy."* Joy is worth the sticks and stones of others' criticism. May we be courageous enough to practice joy.

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