

Several recent articles have reported the increasing popularity of what they're calling "grandma" hobbies: things like knitting, sewing, embroidery, quilting. I'm flattered to find I've been so cutting edge for so long, although I'm pretty sure that's not how trends work. But for years I've been one of those people sitting toward the back of the lecture hall, listening very attentively, while knitting. My mom taught me one year over Christmas break, and I've been knitting ever since. I remember working on some project during bishop's convocation, probably a decade ago, when a colleague stopped during a break to watch me finish a row of stitches; after a minute he said, essentially, "Sometime I'll show you how to be a really good knitter, like me."...Don't you just love it when you're working on something and someone who isn't working at all tells you how you could be doing better?

On this fifth Sunday of Lent we take a break from Luke's gospel to read about Jesus' visit to some of the most prominent characters in John's gospel, the siblings in Bethany: Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. This scene happens a chapter after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead and about a week before his crucifixion; most of what is recorded in John's gospel between this and Jesus' arrest is his long farewell discourse, where Jesus teaches the disciples how they are to carry on in his physical absence. The twelve official disciples have not exactly been ahead of the learning curve in understanding Jesus' identity and mission, but even before he gives his extended lecture in what it means to follow him, this family in Bethany demonstrates faith-filled discipleship. Lazarus, whom Jesus raised, hosts the party and is at the dinner table. Whether he's listening to Jesus teach or simply enjoying fellowship, Lazarus, whose life Jesus transformed as much as a life possibly could be transformed, is abiding in relationship with Jesus, which is what Jesus will tell his disciples over and over they are to do. Martha, who in John's gospel does *not* complain about Mary sticking her with all the work, serves. Jesus will instruct the disciples to serve each other as he served them. Finally, Mary bathes Jesus' feet in so much perfume she has to wipe off the excess with her hair. We think ahead to the next meal John narrates, the last supper, which begins with Jesus washing the disciples' feet.

Lazarus, Martha, and Mary are described as beloved friends of Jesus even before he raised Lazarus from the dead. If you remember that story, both Martha and Mary felt comfortable enough with Jesus to complain, almost accuse him of taking so long to get to Bethany that Lazarus died while they waited. However close they may have been before that, they must have understood Jesus' divine power in a whole new way after he called Lazarus out of the grave; here each of them model a faithful response to Jesus who is more than friend, teacher, or preacher but who is the Son of God, the Messiah. Judas, however, is not impressed. *Why was this perfume not sold and the money given to the poor?*

Any time Judas is mentioned, John reminds us that he is the bad guy: *Judas, the one who would betray him, Judas the betrayer, the betrayer of Jesus, Judas the one who the devil chose to betray Jesus*...Here John even calls Judas a thief and suggests that what he's really upset about is not a missed

opportunity to help the poor but a missed opportunity to steal from the collective purse, since Mary has just dumped about \$15,000 worth of perfume on Jesus. After John so thoroughly discredits Judas, we should not be surprised to hear Jesus stand up for Mary. *Leave her alone; she bought it for my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you don't always have me.*

Judas has pretty strong opinions about how to spend other people's money. He's not arguing about how Jesus and his fellow disciples should spend the money that he's apparently mismanaging for them. He's accusing the family whose house he is sitting in and whose food he is eating of being wasteful because they bought someone else a gift. It's an extravagant gift, but what price would you put on a gift for the person who raised your brother from the dead? What price would you put on a gift if you knew it was the last thing you would give to a loved one before they died? What price would you put on the gift of life itself? On the gift of salvation? Mary seems to understand what Judas did not—who Jesus is and what Jesus is about to do. The other disciples, who still expect Jesus to act as a military or political hero, resist facing the sacrifice Jesus is about to make—arguing when he predicts his suffering, even intervening violently at his arrest; but Mary anoints Jesus with the perfume traditionally used for burial. She will not always have him, so she acts while she can.

Jesus' words about always having the poor with you have, predictably, been misused as an excuse for apathy and inaction regarding poverty. We can be certain that's not what Jesus meant, since scripture explicitly says the opposite: Deuteronomy chapter 15—*Poor persons will never disappear from the earth. That's why I'm giving you this command: you must open your hand generously to your fellow Israelites, to the needy among you, and to the poor who live with you in your land.* So Mary's gift to Jesus does not excuse Judas from the commandment to take care of the poor. The poor were right there all along, and Judas had control of the purse; he could have helped them if he'd wanted to, instead of helping himself. We still hear Judas' argument all the time. It sounds like, *We shouldn't be helping those people when these people need help!* And it almost always comes from someone who doesn't help these people, either.

Judas would have us believe that Mary has been wasteful, whereas Jesus suggests that Mary has been insightful, loving, and generous. Then again, the same Jesus who was priceless to Mary was only worth 30 pieces of silver to Judas. Depending on what they value, one person's generosity is another person's waste, and vice versa. If our lives have been transformed by Jesus, and in response we listen to the Word and eat at the Table like Lazarus did, and we serve selflessly like Martha did, and we give extravagantly like Mary did, and if we really help those in need instead of arguing about who does or doesn't deserve help, if, in any number of ways, we live not according to the values of this world but in answer to Jesus' call, it will certainly look to some people like we've wasted our lives. Instead, may we find we have spent them extravagantly in service of the One who is worthy of all.