

First Presbyterian Church
John 12:1-16, “Cultivating Honor and Letting Go of Shame”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 3/24/2024

One of my early memories from childhood is from a family gathering.

I was downstairs playing Legos with my brother Jeff,
who is 15 years older than me.

We were probably 5 and 20 at the time.

I marveled at what Jeff could make with Legos – his spaceships were just so cool!

Then I looked at what I made. It look stupid and childish.

Like something a five year old would make.

But then Jeff left to see a friend and everyone else was sitting at the table upstairs.

I imagined what it would feel like to show them a spaceship like Jeff’s
and say that I had built this all by myself. They would be so proud of me.

Well, look! There’s Jeff’s spaceship sitting there right now,
and nobody else has seen it.

So I went up the stairs confidently and I showed everyone the Lego creation
and said, “I made this all by myself!”

Everyone at the table looked at me and tried to gauge their response.

After a couple satisfying “oohs” and “ahs,” my mom finally asked,

“Matthew, did you really build that all by yourself?

With no help from Jeff?”

How did she know? I had been outed. The gig was up. I ran to my bedroom crying,
full of shame for what I had done.

The things in my life that pull me down, that keep me from being my best self
have their roots in shame.

Not matching up to standards.

Stepping across boundaries (and being caught!).

Disappointing those whose approval I seek.

Being called out on something I misjudged.

These things don’t need to be recent to be powerful –

shame can take root in us and just linger for a lifetime.

I also felt shame from my parents for not cleaning my desk at school
and my room at home. I was absent minded and forgetful.

I felt shame from my friends for being clumsy and saying
dorky things.

I felt shame at church because of sexual desires
that I didn't know how to deal with.

Over time I developed a really strong aversion
to situations that might bring shame on myself.

Can you relate? It's true for most of us.

We naturally avoid shame and seek out honor,
whether we are consciously aware of it or not.

In the first century, the stakes were even higher.

Honor and shame were the primary social currency
that opened and closed opportunities

not just for an individual, but for their whole family.

The story we look at today reveals the power of Jesus to heal us in the places
we feel ashamed.

The story takes place just before the Passover
and the Festival of Unleavened Bread.

Jesus comes to Bethany where his friends

Lazarus, Mary, and Martha live.

They are siblings, and the closest friends Jesus' has outside the disciples.

Lazarus had died four days earlier, and Jesus, shocking everyone,
asked for his tomb to be opened up

(despite the tremendous stench of death contained within.)

He called upon Lazarus to walk out, and he did!

After they get him cleaned up and smelling like a living person again,
the family holds a dinner in Jesus' honor.

How cool is that?

"Hey Jesus, thanks for raising our brother from the dead,
can we at least make you dinner?"

Jesus says, "Sure, see you around 5."

So they're having dinner, and of course the disciples are invited as well.

Martha is serving people, making sure the glasses are full.

Lazarus is reclining at the table,

still working off a four-day bender from hell.

The disciples are trying to act like they always knew
Jesus would come through for Lazarus.

And then, in walks Mary. She emerges with a pint of nard –
an incredibly powerful, rich, and fragrant perfume.

It's also incredibly expensive.

She opens it up, and commences to pour it all over the feet of Jesus.

We don't know why she did this.

I love the way J. Ellsworth Kalas describes this:

“Now this perfume-pouring would, of itself, have been enough, but Mary had only begun. When I say she was extravagant, I hope you realize I'm speaking of far more than money. [As] Mary ... began to wipe Jesus' feet with her hair, it was an act of such complete self-abandonment that it would mark her in the community for the rest of her life. They would never mention her name again without a reference—by story, by gesture, or by innuendo—to this day. Mary's gift of perfume was large, but not to be compared with the gift of herself.”

— J. Ellsworth Kalas

In terms of honor and shame, she had given an immense amount of honor to Jesus.

But in doing so she also invited shame upon herself.

The shame arrived first in the form of a question:

[LOUD] “Why wasn't this perfume sold
and the money given to the poor?” Judas exclaimed.

Well, if you think about it like an unfeeling robot, it's not a bad question.

Jesus' ministry is a near-constant affirmation of God's love for the poor.

Why depart from that practice now?

Perhaps Mary sees something they don't:

That honoring Jesus is the gateway to truly honoring the poor.

Afterall, he famously taught that when the faithful

offer clothing, shelter, water, and visitation to those in need,

they offer those things to him.

At any rate, according to John the gospel writer,

Judas is only concerned about wasted money

because he wants to get his own hands on it.

Even after years with Jesus, Judas is only using the poor as a prop:

a means to the end of lining his own pockets.

I would think that every heart would melt at the words of Jesus,

the presence of Jesus, the very touch of Jesus...

but some hearts are hardened, and we don't know why.

In fact, the gears of conspiracy are already turning against Jesus
and his community.

[Pause]

Jesus sees the purity of heart that has led Mary to do such an extravagant thing.
“Leave her alone,” he said in v. 7. “It was intended that she should save
this perfume for the day of my burial.”

The pure heart of Jesus sees into the hearts of all people. He sees your heart.

At bottom, I think Mary understands what is happening here
in a way the disciples don't. Jesus would soon suffer shame
that surpassed anything else they could imagine.

She's getting him ready for death, and she will honor Jesus while he's alive
regardless of the shame that it brings on her.

Jesus also saw the concern of these others at the table for the poor.
So he quoted another line the passage from Deuteronomy
that they were thinking of—

“the poor you will always have among you—
and you can help them any time you want.
But you will not always have me.”

With just one line Jesus has graciously reframed the entire scene,
taking the focus off of shame.

Jesus sees the world so clearly that he can take our actions,
and even our shortcomings, and with one line he can completely flip
our understanding of what's happening.

Jesus sees to the very core of life.

And he saw that at the center of things, what Mary did was beautiful.

When we are hypervigilant against shame, we live in fear.

It is fear that we don't belong, fear that we won't be accepted,
fear that we are bad in an unredeemable way.

Jesus sees through our fears,
finds us in our most shameful moment,
and tells us that we are loved. That we belong.

The next day, Jesus made his way into Jerusalem.

The crowd was gathered there for the Passover, and they heard
that Jesus was coming, their instinct was to greatly honor him.

They said, “Hosanna!” Which means, “Save us!”

They quote from Psalm 118, and they even declare Jesus to be King!

It’s a scene of great irony:

The crowd is cultivating honor for Jesus,
even as the chief priests were plotting an act of great shame.

Of course the crowd’s understanding of Jesus was limited.

But Jesus accepts their display of honor, just as he accepted Mary’s.

The key to overcoming shame is recognizing whose opinion really matters.

Mary has realized that it doesn’t matter what the other disciples think,
it doesn’t matter what the neighbors think,
it doesn’t matter what her family thinks.

She wants to know what Jesus thinks.

And Jesus does not bring any shame upon her.

Jesus greatly honors her astonishing behavior.

When you feel ashamed of what you have done, of your limitations,
of how people around you might judge you or perceive you,
can you take the approach of Mary?

Can you take the approach of this Palm Sunday crowd.

Put aside what other people think, focus on what *Jesus* thinks about you.

And rather than focusing on what you cannot control,
do what you can: Honor Jesus, who truly loves you,
with your words and your deeds.

Shifting our frame of reference can make a tremendous difference for ourselves
as well as for others. Think about it:

two thousand years later, Mary’s anointing of Jesus’ feet
still gives *us* something to be thankful for.

As we approach Holy Week, let’s join Jesus and Mary in consciously preparing
for his death and burial.

Let us also join in noticing the beautiful things that take place around us.

Let’s welcome the perspective that places Jesus as the highest object
of our affection—even if it means doing something
strange and extravagant in his name.

Ask God how you might let go of your shame and cultivate honor this week?