



**Bangor Theological Seminary**  
BANGOR | PORTLAND

## **The Anointing**

**A Sermon on John 12:1-8  
by President Kent Ulery**

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First Parish Church UCC  
Brunswick, Maine

Can you smell it? The stench, I mean, the odor? Do you smell it?

Shut your eyes. It's ok. Everybody shut your eyes and clear from your heads all the beauty of this sanctuary. Erase the high vaulted ceiling, the elevated pulpit, the windows and the walls and the pews. Just wipe the entire slate clean.

Instead of the sanctuary, picture a town dump. Not a sanitary landfill but a dump the way dumps used to be. See the rubbish and the rust and the rot lying exposed to the sun's rays. See the pile of broken appliances, the heap of empty paint cans, the mountain of decomposing lawn waste. See the trash blowing in the wind, the big birds picking away at decaying debris, the rats running through mounds of ripening garbage and reeking diapers, the smoke curling from smouldering remains.

Now, with that in your mind's eye, do you smell it? The stench? The odor?

Imagine yourself living at that dump, raising your children there, struggling to make a living scavenging through the junk for something to sell. Imagine yourself so poor that when you pass from this world you cannot afford a burial plot, so they just pile your corpse at the side. Now do you smell the odor -- the stench of death?

Tara Olsen is a student at Bangor Theological Seminary. For the latest issue of our newspaper, *The Open Door*, Tara has written an article about her traveling to Guatemala to engage in mission work among the people of *La Basura*. The word, in English, means "trash." It is the name given to the Guatemala City dump – to the largest dump in Central America. Tara voluntarily gave a week of her life to serve families who rummage through the trash in that dump in order to survive.

After touring the dump (yes, after seeing on its distant edge what appeared to be a crumbling stack of matchbooks, but which turned out to be the deteriorating graves of the poorest of the poor), Tara spent her week working, reading, teaching, playing, and helping children and youth. From her point of view she was “sharing love and caring...treating them with the dignity and respect that every human being deserves.” Writes Tara: “When Jesus knew someone needed care, he ministered to them face-to-face.”

For those who have eyes to see, what Tara did was a beautiful thing. But not everyone can see the value in her extravagance act. According to Tara:

Inevitably, during the nervousness and flurry of preparing for the trip, someone in the community asks the eternal question, “Why not just send money down to the folks there? Wouldn’t that make the most sense? Rather than wasting thousands of dollars on travel and food, wouldn’t they be better served if they had that money? I mean think of what it could buy?”<sup>i</sup>

No doubt, there is much truth in what the questions suggest. But one cannot help but notice that these questions mimic the question that was on the lips of Judas in our scripture lesson for today.

The story of the anointing at Bethany is told differently in each of the gospels, with the four writers disagreeing on several significant details.

Matthew and Mark tell the story very near to the end of Jesus’ life. Luke recounts it early in Jesus’ ministry. John splits the difference, saying it occurred sometime prior to Holy Week – “six days before the Passover.”

Matthew and Mark agree the anointing took place in the dwelling of Simon the Leper. Luke argues for the house of some anonymous Pharisee. John claims the site was the home of Jesus’ friends: Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

Matthew and Mark do not identify the woman doing the anointing. Luke casts doubt upon her character (“If this man were a prophet he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him.”) John clearly states it was Lazarus’ sister, Mary, the spiritual one who preferred to listen while Jesus taught over helping out her sister Martha in the kitchen.

In Mark’s account of the anointing, there were some people who were upset about money being wasted. Though he leaves out the monetary detail, Matthew says those who became indignant were among the twelve disciples. No one is worried about the money in Luke. John makes Judas Iscariot the lone questioning culprit.

In Matthew and Mark, Jesus' head is anointed with oil – a symbolic act marking him as a prophet, priest, and king. In Luke it is not head but feet, and the anointing with oil is secondary to being washed with the woman's tears (a detail Luke only adds). John agrees Jesus' feet were anointed; but he does not mention any tears; and, unlike the three other gospel writers, John emphasizes the fragrance, the smell, the scent of the perfume permeating the house.

We won't even try to harmonize the four stories. It is enough just to explore the meaning of John's version. Let me quickly set the context.

In the previous chapter Jesus is summoned to this same village, to this same house, by this same Mary. Lazarus is gravely ill; and while Jesus is delayed in getting there, Lazarus dies. An emotional scene ensues upon Jesus' arrival, with Lazarus' sisters lamenting "if only..." Jesus had gotten there sooner. Jesus is moved to tears. Here is where we find the shortest verse in the Bible: "Jesus wept."

So Jesus asks for the stone to be removed from the tomb. Martha, always the practical one, tries stopping him. "He hath been dead four days," she cautions, "by this time he stinketh!" (Note the reference to the smell.)

But Jesus won't be deterred. Once the stone is rolled away, he commands Lazarus to come out; whereupon the dead man comes out, his hands and feet still bound, his face covered, by the grave cloths. "Unbind him," Jesus orders; and Lazarus is resuscitated -- a foreshadowing of what God will do on Easter morn, only on a much grander scale, by resurrecting Jesus from the dead.

According to John, it is this miracle which results in the plot against Jesus' life.

Temporarily escaping his enemies by retreating to Ephraim near the wilderness, Jesus then returns to the place where the stench of Lazarus' death previously filled the air. Martha, no doubt still celebrating her brother's restored life, prepares a dinner party. But Mary, spiritually more sensitive than all of Jesus' obtuse disciples, gets what's really going on, what's going to happen next, what will transpire once Jesus encounters his opponents during the Passover. Somehow Mary perceives the torture, the suffering, the death -- the hell -- that Jesus will face on the cross.

By the way, the Hebrew word for "hell" is *Gehenna* -- the ancient name given to that awful smelling town dump just outside the walls of Jerusalem.

So, in anticipation of Jesus' impending demise, Mary goes ahead and anoints Jesus for burial. "The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume," writes John. Only the bouquet to be associated with Jesus' death, according to John's theology, is very different from the stench connected with Lazarus'. It is nothing less than the aroma of God's love for the world.

What Mary did was extraordinarily loving and caring. Yes, it was extravagant. Yes, it was expensive. If, as Judas suggests, the perfume in that alabaster jar could have been sold for three hundred denarii, that was equivalent in the first century to a full year's wages for the average worker. But was that act any different than our sacrificing something we want in order to satisfy a desire of a dying friend, or our depleting our savings accounts to secure comfort for a dying relative?

Mary's ministering to Jesus in his time of impending need was touchingly beautiful...only Judas couldn't see it. The perfume's power proved repugnant to him, reeking in his angry nostrils. "Why was this perfume not sold and the money given to the poor?" he decries. (John claims Judas' motives were not entirely honorable, as might be true of some who articulate such sentiments today.) "Leave her alone," Jesus counters, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Those words of Jesus have been misused over the centuries as a rationalization for complacency in response to the needs of the poor. Nothing could be further from their original meaning. Here Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 15:11. "There will never cease to be some in need on the earth..." Now listen to the rest of the verse: "...I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'" As Duke's ethicist Stanley Hauerwas comments: "The poor that we always have with us is Jesus. It is to the poor that all extravagance is to be given."<sup>ii</sup>

Mary had the opportunity to minister unto Jesus personally. Tara had the opportunity to minister unto Jesus by helping "the very least of these" in the Guatemala City dump. We, too, have opportunity upon opportunity to minister unto Jesus by caring for those who are in need, "living in love in the same way that Christ loved us" -- as Ephesians puts it -- "a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

So, do you smell it now? Do you smell the perfume from that alabaster jar filling this house in Brunswick? Does it smell here to you as sweet as honeysuckle on the vine, as comforting as new mown hay, as refreshing as pine in the woods?

Such is the aroma of the love of God acted out in the world through service.

It is nothing less than the stench of death being overcome by the scent of life...  
life abundant...life eternal.

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<sup>i</sup> Olsen, Tara. "Face-to-Face: Mission Work in Guatemala," *The Open Door*. Bangor Theological Seminary: Winter 2010. Page 3.

<sup>ii</sup> Stanley Hauerwas. *Matthew*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006. Page 215. Quoted by H. Stephen Shoemaker in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (eds.), *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. Page 145.