



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Gratitude Does

SCRIPTURE:
John 11: 1-8

November 20, 2022 – Sermon by Rev. Hallie Hottle

This week we will likely gather around tables with people we care about, or, people we're related to. If we're lucky, those two groups might be the same. And as we gather, if we can remember in the midst of food and football and all the things we must tend to, we might recount the things that we are grateful for.

I'd encourage you to do that. Gratitude is a powerful thing, and in the collectively hard years we have had, in the midst of the chaos that continues to plague our world, gratitude has a way of calling us back to center—keeping us rooted in what matters. And if we are attentive to it, I think gratitude has the power to change us in remarkable ways.

Mary knows a little something about that. In our story today, we find Jesus in the city of Bethany, in the home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha. This story really begins a chapter earlier, in John 11, when we learn that brother Lazarus has died. Mary and Martha are distraught, upset, and waiting with the disciples for Jesus.

It's a devastating scene. Jesus hasn't made it in time. Surely if he had, their beloved brother would not have died. Jesus finally arrives, and after some conversation and Jesus' own weeping, he brings Lazarus back to life. It is this that is the last straw for some of the Pharisees; Jesus' arrest is set into motion.

Our story today finds us at a dinner table in the aftermath of that resurrection. After dinner has been served, Mary moves from the table. She has a pound of costly perfume, something like a thick oil or ointment. Mary takes this fragrant oil, kneels down to the ground, and begins to anoint Jesus's feet with her hands and hair.

We don't know who all is at this party. We might assume all the disciples are still there. But it's Judas who speaks. He scoffs as he asks Mary, "Why would

you not sell this perfume and give the money to the poor?" Jesus responds, "Leave her alone." He explains she has anointed him for his burial. The end is near. She knows. She has enacted the custom that Jesus would need only days from now. In the other gospels' telling of this scene, Jesus almost literally says, "She has done the good that is hers to do."

We typically focus on all that will come next when we read this story. We focus on Mary's faith, how she knows his death is coming, while the other disciples seem to be in the dark. But I think there is more happening here.

Yes, an anointing for burial was the good and right thing for Mary to do. But the scene unfolds not just with perfume but the "costly" kind—an entire pound of it, too much for a single anointing. The "whole house" is filled with fragrance. And her hair... a woman's hair would have been expected to be covered in this time and place, especially in the company of men—especially in the company of someone regarded as their teacher.

But Mary's hair is everywhere. Uncovered, her head bowed to the floor, wrapped around Jesus' feet, sticky with perfume. The whole scene is a mess, really. It's excessive. Abundant. Reckless. From Judas' reaction, it's too much.

Yes, Mary knows what is coming. She does what is good for her to do. But this is more than that. This is a scene of someone overcome with gratitude. Her awareness of all she has been given—both in the life restored to her brother and the life given to her by this man, who performs miracles, preaches love, and teaches a new way to be—her gratitude, the oil, her hair, it all overflows in this excessive offering.

I think that's what gratitude does. I am grateful in this. I learned what gratitude does from one of the best. My mom was a woman who exuded gratitude in

everything she did. She learned some lessons early in life that taught her to take nothing for granted. And she didn't.

The first time she had breast cancer was in 2009. I was in my first year of seminary and left school early to come home. There were surgeries, and chemo, and radiation. All of it was brutal. But my mom was not one to complain.

I don't say that as if that's a virtue. I think complaining is often necessary, even helpful. (I'm quite fond of it, really.) But her particular posture of gratitude didn't leave her much to complain about. Even at her worst, she couldn't help but to count all that was good.

Her friends would check in and be surprised, even frustrated, by her lack of complaints. And so, one of her friends knew how big of a deal it was when my mom finally broke down in front of her. Health insurance has changed since 2009. Not enough, unfortunately. When she finally broke down, that's what it was about. The pressure of the mounting medical bills was too much. And hearing this, her friend got to work.

There's this thing that happens in small midwestern towns like the one I grew up in. Sometimes, when someone in the community has a need they can't meet on their own, the whole town will come together and have a fundraiser. I personally think it's just an excuse for a party. That's what they did.

I'll tell you: It was uncomfortable. To be the recipient of others' generosity requires a particular kind of humility that doesn't always come naturally to us raised in this culture of "making it on our own." My mom first said, "No." She couldn't ask for such a thing. But, it was already planned; she just had to show up.

Most of the event is a blur to me now. But what I do remember, is how my mom acted afterwards. Days, weeks later, she was still repeating, "My cup overflows, my cup overflows."

In the years that followed, she learned what happens when a town so publicly shows up to help you through something like this. She became an unintentional spokesperson for breast cancer.

My mom would receive calls from people after their own diagnoses. She'd be asked advice for everything from diet changes to wig styling. And because

my mom was a ridiculously kind person, she managed this with grace. But she and I talked every day and I knew she hated this. She didn't feel equipped to help anyone. She was still reeling from her own experience. The emotional recovery from cancer is often longer and harder than the physical one.

Being both her daughter and a pastor who believes in good mental health care, I would advise her that she didn't have to do it. I assured her people would understand. She was still recovering, too. "Boundaries, mom, boundaries," I would preach.

It was seven years later that she was diagnosed again. The prognosis was different this time and she died later that year, in December of 2016.

We celebrated her life right after Christmas, and once again, the entire town showed up—packing our tiny home church. But what I remember most from that day, and the days that followed, were all the people I didn't know, some I'd never seen before, who came to tell us what my mom had done for them.

"She sat with me during chemo, so I wouldn't have to go by myself." "She called me before every surgery, encouraged me." "She gave me a reason to laugh, telling me what she thought of cancer (with words that can't be said from a pulpit)."

And then there were these... trinkets. My mom was a tactile person. We made fun of her for always having something in her pocket—a little cross, a "worry" stone, some random stick one of us gave her when we were 3, that she held onto. And apparently, as she visited and cared for people, she shared these trinkets.

Here were these people I had never met before, extending their hands with the tiny gifts she had given them, each one held as if it was something sacred, evidence of gratitude poured out.

I didn't know until then that my mother didn't take my advice. She felt unequipped for these encounters. And she did it anyway. She went. She called. She gave. She gave and she gave because her cup overflowed. That's what gratitude does.

When I read this story of Mary, that's what I see. It's tactile and tangible and messy and real. She's overwhelmed with what Jesus has done for her. She pours out all of herself in response. It's too much. More than what is required. But that's what gratitude does. And now, these 2,000 years later, evidence of

Mary's gratitude is still rippling through our world.

I don't have time to tell you everything about this, but I can't let us leave this story without telling you a little. New research about this text was first published in 2016. It's been circulating more widely lately, because of a sermon preached this summer by Diana Butler Bass.¹ Bass is a historian and author who writes about the history and future of Christianity. And in this sermon, she welcomed us into a conversation that has been rattling Biblical scholarship.

These stories from John 11 and 12, they read as if they're about two women: Mary and Martha. The sisters we think about when we hear those two names are from the gospel of Luke. Martha's presence here in John has always been odd. Well, it turns out: Martha isn't actually here.

Looking at the oldest papyrus we have from these two chapters of John, there are a bunch of marks made by an editor. We've known that. These marks have been documented before. But it seems that no one has noticed until now that these marks follow a particular pattern.

Every time we read Martha's name, the text actually says "Mary," with an editor's change of a single letter that makes it say "Martha." Other edits change pronouns and make other words plural, so that when translated it reads as if we're talking about two sisters. The edits specifically serve to add Martha to the story. So why would anyone do that? Why does it matter?

Adding Martha to this story waters down the character of Mary Magdalene. There are some important words here that come from Martha. If Mary is restored as the only sister, her role rivals the power of Peter. People have hypothesized about this for centuries. But this is the first time we've had textual evidence that it happened.

But how did we finally come to know this? This is the best part. So there's this young woman named Elizabeth living in New York City. She's a young adult, goes by Libbie, and she's a singer and songwriter. One

day she's walking around the city and she stops into this little church garden to rest and pray. And there, she hears this voice.

Everything indicates she's a fairly typical young adult at this point. She's a person of faith. Episcopalian. So hearing voices is brand new for her. And the voice says something like, "Ask Mary Magdalene."²

It's very weird. So she does what she knows to do. Libbie is a songwriter, so she writes a song. It's called "Magdalene." You can find it online.³

But... she can't shake the feeling that there's something more being asked of her. So finally she walks into a seminary there in New York and tells them she wants to study Mary Magdalene. They tell her she could come and get a Masters in New Testament Studies if she wants? So... that's what she does. Learns the ancient languages. The whole thing.

For her Master's thesis, she wants to study John 11 and 12. And when she looks at this piece of papyrus, she knows something is off. She's the one who notices all these editing marks are meant to add Martha to the story.

This young singer-songwriter from New York City went from opening for Jewel, to discovering something Biblical scholars had missed for 2,000 years. Libbie is now a doctoral student at Duke. Her research is published in the Harvard Review and the Nestle-Aland translation committee is debating how her discovery will impact future Biblical translations. This is the most radical change to the written gospel that has ever happened and we are living it in real time.

Mary pours out the perfume. Too much. All of it. The entire house smells of fragrance. There's so much excess, she leans down, hair everywhere, giving all of herself, overflowing with gratitude. All these years later, her witness continues to expand, continues to overflow into unexpecting people who cannot help but continue to share it. That's what gratitude does.

So, wherever you are this week, I hope you make some time to consider all you are grateful for. But remember, gratitude doesn't live as a list. To practice

1 Diana Butler Bass, "Mary the Tower," transcript of sermon delivered July 22, 2022, dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/mary-the-tower.

2 Bruce Albert and Cindy Loose, "How a singer-songwriter from Portland became a Mary Magdalene scholar," *The Oregonian*, August 6, 2016, oregonlive.com/music/2017/08/libbie_schrader_singer_songwriter_theologian.

3 "Magdalene" by Libbie Schrader can be found here and elsewhere: reverbnation.com/libbieschrader/song/4897994-magdalene

gratitude, to pursue a life that reflects our awareness of who God is and what God has done.... it has the power to change us. It has the power to change everything.

To live this way—you will feel ill-equipped. Voices around you might scoff. You may need to keep a trinket in your pocket to remind you. Because gratitude

will take the good that is ours to do, and multiply it, expand it—expand us—more than we can imagine. That's what gratitude does.

Let us pray: God of abundance, your love overflows. Make us to notice, and in our noticing to be grateful, and in our gratitude to live more like Mary—giving all of ourselves in response. Amen.