Essential Question #4:

‘Do You Need a Deeper Devotion?’

John 12:1-8

March 22, 2020

North UMC

In 1964, jazz saxophonist John Coltrane recorded his masterpiece, ‘A Love Supreme.’ It is an expression of his devotion to God. In the liner notes he wrote:

‘DEAR LISTENER: ALL PRAISE BE TO GOD TO WHOM ALL PRAISE IS DUE.  Let us pursue Him in the righteous path. Yes it is true; "seek and ye shall find." Only through Him can we know the most wondrous bequeathal.  
  
‘During the year 1957, I experienced, by the grace of God, a spiritual awakening which was to lead me to a richer, fuller, more productive life. At that time, in gratitude, I humbly asked to be given the means and privilege to make others happy through music. I feel this has been granted through His grace. ALL PRAISE TO GOD.  
  
‘As time and events moved on, a period of irresolution did prevail. I entered into a phase which was contradictory to the pledge and away from the esteemed path; but thankfully, now and again through the unerring and merciful hand of God, I do perceive and have been duly re-informed of His OMNIPOTENCE, and of our need for, and dependence on Him. At this time I would like to tell you that NO MATTER WHAT ... IT IS WITH GOD. HE IS GRACIOUS AND MERCIFUL. HIS WAY IS IN LOVE, THROUGH WHICH WE ALL ARE. IT IS TRULY – A LOVE SUPREME.  
  
‘This album is a humble offering to Him. An attempt to say "THANK YOU GOD" through our work, even as we do in our hearts and with our tongues. May He help and strengthen all men in every good endeavor.’

If you are cooped up at home or in your office this week, listen to Coltrane’s ‘A Love Supreme’ and listen for how it fills the room with passion and intensity. I warn you, this is not easy listening, elevator music jazz. It is overwhelming because Coltrane’s devotion was intense.

It fills the room with his expression of complete devotion to God just like Mary’s perfume filled the room. At Lazarus’ house, she and her sister Martha hosted a banquet in honor of Jesus for resurrecting their brother. At one point, she interrupts the festivity of the disciples. She breaks out a pound of pure nard and begins to swab his feet with all of it and then wipes his feet with her hair. The scent of the perfume fills the room. The smell gets in their hair and clothes and they will be smelling it on them for days to come.

Mary’s act of devotion is unusual and extravagant. It was highly unusual for the guest of honor to have his feet anointed and for a woman to use her hair to wipe them. It broke all norms of devotion. It was an extravagant act of devotion. The perfume cost 300 denarii, an average year’s wages. She is over-the-top with her devotion to Jesus.

Today, Do you need a deeper devotion to God? Yes, you have been faithful. Yes, you have been obedient. Yes, you have been sincere. But, today, do you need to take your faith to the next level? Do you need to practice the deeper devotion of Mary?

Mary’s deeper devotion shows us who Jesus is and what he was doing. Her anointing anticipates what will come next in the Gospel story. The next evening the disciples and Jesus will gather again for a banquet, their last one. He will interrupt dinner, just as she did, and wash the disciples’ feet. He will give everything he has—his popularity, his security, his privilege, his life—for us. On the cross, he will enact divine generosity by giving himself so that humanity can receive the victorious and everlasting life that we see him first giving to Lazarus. Mary’s act of devotion helps us understand the passion in the Passion story.

Mary’s deeper devotion teaches us how to follow Jesus’ service and generosity.

She gives us an example of service. If we love Jesus, we will serve others like she served Jesus. We have been instructed to practice social distancing to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus, and that is a common sense practice of compassion. However, there is a difference between social distancing and selfishness. Now more than ever, we need to express our devotion to Jesus through our generous love for one another. There are creative ways in this age of social media and technology to reach out to those who struggle with anxiety and depression to keep them from becoming isolated. We can serve our neighbors in ways that practice social distancing while following Jesus’ example of care, such as getting groceries for those who cannot get out and then leaving them on their doorstep. We already live in a culture of isolation and loneliness, and we will only make the pandemic worse if we let it feed our emotional isolation. Like Mary, our unusual acts of devotion show the world the faithfulness of Jesus.

We are continuing to operate our feeding ministry Bread and Bowl but we are doing it in an unusual way. Instead of serving meals in the church, we are modeling social distancing by distributing carry out bags under the portico. We will continue to modify how we serve as things develop, but we will not abandon our most vulnerable neighbors during this crisis. Like Mary, our unusual acts of devotion show the community the love of Jesus. When we serve our neighbors we are serving Jesus who said, ‘When you did it to the least of these, you have done it unto me.’

How can you practice this deeper devotion to Jesus by serving others this week?

She gives us an example of generosity. If we love Jesus, we will give to others like she gave to Jesus. Now more than ever, your church and other service providers need your financial contributions. In this era of online giving, we can share our wealth. Like Mary, our acts of devotion should be extravagant reflections of the generosity of Jesus.

How can you practice this deeper devotion to Jesus by giving to others this week?

At the heart of Mary’s devotion is her motivation. She is in love with Jesus. She is not focused on what others may think about her strange behavior. She is only focused on Jesus. She is not focused on her well-being. She is only focused on Jesus. She reminds me of the Gospel song ‘Give Me Jesus’:

‘Give me Jesus.  
give me Jesus,  
you may have all this world,  
give me Jesus.’

The greatest difference between Mary’s devotion and Judas’ devotion was their motivations. As the scent of Mary’s devotion permeated Judas’ robe it did not penetrate his heart. On the surface, it sounded like Judas was more faithful—‘We should cash in the nard and give the money to the poor. That is what our movement is all about. This money can demonstrate that the new kingdom is happening.’ We know his true motive was to pilfer the money from the common purse. He is disingenuous. She is authentic.

His rationalization of his sin is premised on an either-or choice. Either we give the money to the poor or we are selfish. Sounds good, but it works to his advantage. Her act of devotion works on a both-and. She can give to Jesus and advance the ministry of servanthood. He is calculated. As she poured the nard onto his feet, the calculator in his head was tallying up the amount. She is exuberant in her giving; in his eyes, her devotion is reckless.

Following Mary’s example forces us to reckon with our motivations. The more we practice a deeper devotion, more clarity and focus we gain in our faith. What develops in us is a clearer, purer focus on Jesus. Christ alone is our motivation. The love of God in the Spirit of Christ becomes our sole motivation and fulfillment. Just as Mary’s perfume filled the room, Jesus saturates our lives.

This deeper devotion made the earliest Methodist distinct. Here is how Charles Wesley described it in an early hymn:

‘O grant that nothing in my soul  
                May dwell, but thy pure love alone!  
        O may thy love possess me whole,  
                My joy, my treasure, and my crown!  
        Strange fires far from my heart remove;  
        My every act, word, thought, be love!’

Do you need this deeper devotion? I need this kind of deeper devotion because when my motivations are compromised, the work of serving in the name of Jesus is not fulfilling. I need this kind of deeper devotion to take my mind and heart off of the constant anxiety in our society. This deeper devotion forms an impenetrable barrier that prevents the anxiety, bitterness, despair, and anger from infecting my heart. I need this deeper devotion so I can continue to give in unusual and extravagant ways that witness to the unusual extravagance of the cross of Christ.

This deeper devotion animated the Sisters of Mercy in Vicksburg during the Civil War. In 1863, Grant’s Union troops laid seize to the city of Vicksburg. As it wore on for 47 days, the greatest threat to life was not war but disease. A malaria epidemic broke out. Citizens had dug caves in the side of hills to take refuge from cannon fire, but it did not protect them from the spread of disease. Instead of digging caves, the Sisters of Mercy converted their school into a hospital. From December 1862 to the end of the siege on July 4, 1863, they took over deserted homes throughout the city for use with casualties. They also set up a hospital in Mississippi Springs for 800 sick and wounded patients. Later, they extended their work to Jackson and Oxford.

Do you need a deeper devotion today? I invite you to prayerfully consider ways to reach out to those in need in this time of crisis. We can be both innovative and extravagant in showing Jesus our devotion by serving those whom Jesus loves.