

West Van Baptist, March 22  
**Dinner with Jesus – More Precious than Anything**  
John 12:1-8; Mat 26:12-13

I. Preparing our hearts and minds

This last week Diane started buying groceries for Easter dinner, which reminded me that we are now 2 weeks from Easter. Can you believe it?! I find that Christmas seems to approach slowly (perhaps because we listen to Christmas music for so long), but Easter sneaks up quickly.

That means on the liturgical calendar we're in the middle of Lent. I don't know about you, but I didn't grow up with Lent. In the conservative Protestant church where I was raised, no one ever talked about Lent. That would have been "too Catholic." Tensions between Catholics and Protestants have softened since those days, but in 1960's and 70's Evangelical churches on the prairies, being "too Catholic" was not a good thing.

I remember one year our pastor introduced a devotional book, suggesting that our church work through it in the weeks leading up to Easter. It was called the "50 Day Spiritual Adventure." It invited Christians to walk through a bunch of spiritual practices: prayer, Bible reading, fasting and other spiritual disciplines. The idea was to let it enrich our spiritual lives, especially as we prepared for the Easter season. Years later I remember realizing: Oh, actually we were practicing Lent. We didn't call it "Lent"—which would be "too Catholic." But our "50 day spiritual adventure" was basically a form of "Lent-light."

To make matters more confusing, I went to school with some kids who came from families that were very loosely connected to church, who followed traditions without really believing anything. When Lent came around each year, I'd hear conversations like this. "Hey, what are you giving up for Lent?" "Oh, I'm giving up Black Forest cake. What about you?" "Oh, I'm giving up pedicures." "But you never have pedicures!" "That's true. But I could if I wanted—so I'm giving up the option."

This gave me the impression that Lent was not only "too Catholic," but also basically meaningless. It was only years later that I began to understand Lent—properly understood—was about preparing my heart and mind to appreciate Easter more fully.

Easter is an important season, filled with precious and important truths. But it comes and goes quickly, and it's surprisingly easy to let it slip past without really paying much attention. That's why Lent became part of Christian tradition. The Bible doesn't tell us we have to observe Lent; in fact the Bible doesn't mention Lent at all. But it does teach us that Christ's truth needs to fill and shape our minds. The spiritual disciplines of Lent are designed to help focus our thoughts: on our need for God, and Jesus' amazing sacrifice for us, and on the wonder of His resurrection.

I'm not preaching about Lent this morning. But today's message is about *preparation*. Every year I like to spend at least a few weeks looking at themes that help us to prepare for Easter. So today is the first in a 3-week series I've called "Dinner with Jesus."

In the gospels, Jesus teaches and interacts in various settings. Sometimes He preaches to big crowds. Sometimes He chats with people along the side of the road. Sometimes He debates with

rabbis in the temple or the synagogue. Occasionally He visits with a small group. Some of the most intimate small-group meetings happen over meals at someone's home or around a campfire.

The Bible only tells us about a few of those meals. Three of the most interesting "dinner with Jesus" stories are clustered around Easter—right before and right after Jesus' death and resurrection. These meals happened during the most strategic time in Jesus' life and ministry, and they come right at the climax of the gospel accounts. So it seems reasonable to expect that we'll learn some things from these "dinners with Jesus" that help us to appreciate the Easter season.

This morning we'll start with the first dinner. We read about it in John 12, Mark 14, and Matthew 26. Let's walk through the story together, then I'll suggest some applications for today.

## II. Dinner in Bethany

The Gospel of John tells us that *six days before the Passover celebration began, Jesus arrived in Bethany, the home of Lazarus—the man He had raised from the dead (12:1).*

Thousands of Jews came from near and far to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem, so the city would be full to overflowing. Jesus had friends in Bethany, about 3 km away. So that was a natural place to stay as a home base during the feast. When Jesus made His "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, it was by the road from Bethany. They went back and forth on the same road for the rest of the week, passing the Mount of Olives where Jesus would do His last public teaching, and the Garden of Gethsemane where He would be arrested.

On one of those days, Jesus' friends held a special supper in His honor. We don't know for sure when this happened. John 12 says Jesus came to Bethany 6 days before the Passover. Matthew and Mark tell us that the Jewish leaders were plotting to kill Jesus, and *the Passover and Unleavened Bread were two days away (Mk 14:1).* Each book goes on to talk about the supper, and none is absolutely clear about the timing; so we're left to guess whether this meal happened on the Friday or the Tuesday before Easter, or sometime between.

It doesn't really matter. Either way, this was the last week of Jesus' ministry. Around the same time He was welcomed into Jerusalem by cheering crowds, He gave His final public sermons, and He had conflicts with Jewish leaders in the temple. Enemies plotted to kill Him, but so far His friends and disciples could only see that He was becoming more famous. Hoping He would soon be proclaimed King, they thought this was a great time for a party.

So the group gathered at the house of a man called Simon the Leper (Mat 26:6, Mk 14:3). We don't know anything about Simon. Perhaps he was one of the lepers Jesus healed earlier. That would make sense; no one wanted to have dinner in the house of a person who was *still* a leper! In any case, Simon loved Jesus, wanted to celebrate, and had a big enough home for a party.

We know more about some of the other guests. Jesus' good friend Lazarus was there. Lazarus was becoming famous as "that guy Jesus raised from the dead" (see John 11). His sisters Mary and Martha were present too. Martha was helping to serve dinner—as usual. She was a worker-bee, always eager to do what was needed. Mary preferred to be close to Jesus and listen to Him teach. This got her in trouble during an earlier dinner, recorded in Luke 10.

Now Mary was upsetting the group again, but in a much more dramatic way. She didn't just sit at Jesus' feet and listen when others thought she should be serving. This night, Mary performed one of the most impressive acts of love and appreciation that we see anywhere in the Bible. John tells us: *Mary took a 12-ounce jar of expensive perfume made from essence of nard, and she anointed Jesus' feet with it, wiping His feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance (Jn 12:3).*

Twelve ounces is a medium cup of coffee. That's not a lot of coffee, but it is a lot of perfume. Matthew and Mark tell us that she broke open the bottle and poured it over Jesus' head. If you pour that much liquid on someone, it will go all over the place: over their head, their shoulders, down their back, over their legs, and onto their feet. Jesus said, *"When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial"* (Mat 26:12). That's exactly what she did—she covered Him with perfume. Then in an act of deep humility she knelt at His feet and wiped up the pooling liquid with her hair.

This perfume—nard—was expensive. It wasn't produced locally. It was imported from India, in delicate carved stone bottles. Mark and John both tell us that this gift was worth at least 300 *denarii*—a year's wages for a typical worker. And Mary didn't just uncork the top of the bottle, dip her finger in, and touch Jesus with it. She broke the bottle wide open and poured it all out, keeping nothing back.

Can you imagine having dinner at someone's home, and watching their daughter bring a \$30,000 bottle of rare wine from the wine cellar, break the bottle over a chair, and pour the whole thing over one of the guests?! That is essentially what Mary did. It was an extraordinary act. It smelled strong and beautiful; and it absolutely shocked everyone.

For most of the group, what shocked them was the waste. Matthew tells us *the disciples were indignant when they saw this, and they said, "Why this waste?"* (26:8). Surely there is a better way to use something so precious. Mary, if you don't want to keep it, why not sell it and give the money to feed the poor? You could feed a lot of people with a year's wages! John adds that Judas was especially loud in his complaints—though not for such a noble reason. He adds: *not that [Judas] cared for the poor—he was a thief, and since he was in charge of the disciples' money, he often stole some for himself* (12:6).

Whatever their motives, Jesus' disciples were all shocked and offended by Mary's extravagant act. Presumably the others also wondered about this. If Martha complained earlier when Mary didn't help with dinner, I can only imagine how upset she would have been at this, not only because of the waste, but also because of the mess.

Jesus, however, was not upset—even though His clothing was now stained and smelly. He replied: *"Leave her alone. She did this in preparation for my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have Me"* (Jn 12:7-8). Matthew and Mark add: *"Truly I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her* (Mat 26:12-13).

We don't know anything about the rest of this dinner. Did everyone go back to eating? Did Jesus teach? Did they sing songs? Did they go outside where the smell wasn't so strong? We just don't know. After Mary did this amazing thing for her Lord, everything else that followed just didn't seem important. Her actions "stole the show." The only other thing we learn from Matthew, Mark, and

Luke is that after this dinner Judas went to the Jewish leaders and made a deal to betray Jesus. He, at least, was not going to waste the chance to make some money.

### III. Some reflections

How does this story help to prepare our minds and hearts for Easter? I see 2 things that give this “dinner with Jesus” special significance.

#### **(1) First, Mary seemed to sense that she was soon going to lose her Lord.**

People speculate about what motivated her gift. Did Mary really know Jesus was going to die? We’re not told. But the gospels describe her as a sensitive person who paid close attention to what Jesus said, even when others weren’t listening.

Jesus spoke more and more often, more and more clearly about “laying down His life” for others. Like a seed, He would be planted in the ground; He would be rejected and “lifted up.” He would die and rise again. You and I read His words now and we see what He meant very clearly. His disciples didn’t get the message at the time. They were busy fighting about who was greatest, and asking when He would restore Israel. After the triumphal entry they expected Him to be crowned king. It took an arrest, trial, and crucifixion to get Jesus’ message into their heads.

But Mary was a listener. She didn’t know exactly what was going to happen. But I think she realized that what awaited Jesus in Jerusalem was not triumph, but rejection and death. That’s what He had been saying, after all.

Besides, there were clues that resistance was building. After Lazarus was raised from the dead, many people came from Jerusalem to see him and to hear the story. Some believed and followed Jesus. Some came representing Jesus’ enemies, and they returned to their masters with reports that fueled the plan to kill Jesus (see John 11:45, 12:9-11). It didn’t take a genius to figure out that trouble was brewing.

I think Mary had a growing sense that Jesus was walking into danger, and that He probably would be arrested, punished, and executed, exactly as He said. Mary loved Him deeply, but she wouldn’t have Him around much longer.

#### **(2) Mary offered a costly gift—that belonged to *her*.**

We don’t pay enough attention to this. People often comment that Mary’s family must have had money—which was true. Few people had bottles of nard in their closet. But in the ancient world, most of a family’s property belonged to the father or the eldest brother. Even in a wealthy family, the children couldn’t just go to the closet and pull out treasures whenever they wanted. They needed permission. This would certainly be true of the daughters.

Notice that it wasn’t Lazarus, or even Martha, who complained about Mary’s act. (And Martha did sometimes complain.) It was Jesus’ disciples. And the complaint wasn’t that Mary had no right to spill this perfume. It was that she wasted something valuable.

I think this is significant. If a special visitor came to my house and my daughter pulled out the keys to her car and said, “These are for you, I want to honor you by giving you my vehicle,” I’d be surprised and maybe a little concerned. But if my daughter pulled out the keys to my car and said, “These are for you, you can have Dad’s vehicle,” I’d be a lot more concerned, and I’d probably stop the process right there.

It seems clear that Mary’s costly gift belonged to *her*.

Women did own some of their own property in the ancient world. This happened in various ways. One of the most common involved a father giving his daughter something valuable—jewelry, or special clothing, or a sum of money, or precious spices—as a kind of dowry. If the young men knew that a young woman owned something valuable, they viewed her as a much more attractive potential wife. If she married, her relationship was more secure because she brought resources into the marriage that she could take out if there was a divorce.

We don’t know whether Mary’s vial of nard was a dowry. But if it was hers, it was a symbol of security and potential benefit for her future. She wasn’t just wasting money. She was literally pouring out her future security, her leverage for a better life, on the head and feet of Jesus. In today’s terms, this would be like receiving a huge scholarship to a prestigious university, or inheriting a downpayment for a first home, and giving it away. Mary was giving Jesus her hope for a good future.

Mary was giving this, knowing that she was soon going to lose Jesus. It was as if she was saying, “Lord I want to give my life to You. But You won’t be here long, so I won’t have years to follow and serve You. Instead, tonight I pour out my best hope for the future because You are worth everything to me, and this may be my only chance to say so.”

I don’t think this was a sad gift. Mary had watched her brother Lazarus walk out of a grave after being dead for 4 days when Jesus spoke the word. She had heard Jesus say, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will not die” (Jn 11:25-26). She knew that somehow in God’s plan, Jesus would prove stronger than death. But she didn’t know how that would unfold. Right now she only knew that she wanted to give her very best to Him before He was taken away.

#### IV. Two practical applications

With these reflections in mind, let me suggest 2 practical applications as we prepare ourselves for Easter.

##### **(1) Do a spiritual appraisal**

The first is: spend some time between now and Easter doing a spiritual appraisal.

We all know what an appraisal is. It’s a careful assessment of something’s value. How precious is that piece of jewelry, that classic car, that home? I suggest that we all take a little time to reflect on just how precious Jesus actually is to us.

It will be tempting to shortcut this exercise by jumping straight to the answer we know we're supposed to give. As Christians, we're supposed to say, "Jesus is the most precious person ever, and the greatest treasure in my life. I'd give anything else for Him."

It's easy to say those words. They might even be true. But just jumping to them without any reflection won't do much to help us prepare for Easter. To make this exercise useful, we need to ask ourselves candid questions that give a clearer picture of the value we place on our Lord.

We might ask many things. "Where do I spend most of my discretionary time? What about my discretionary money? What parts of my life do I talk about with the greatest sense of pride and satisfaction. What do I daydream about?" These can help us to get a sense of the relative value we put on things. But these questions are also shaped by factors that can distort the result. Sometimes I need to spend time or money or mental energy on things that matter this week but that aren't that important to me in life overall.

Two of the best questions to ask in a spiritual appraisal are: *What thing in my life would be the hardest for me to lose? And How would my life be impacted if I "lost" Jesus?*

We don't generally ask these, especially the second, because we know Jesus has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." No one who finds Jesus and follows Him ever needs to worry about "losing" Him.

But that's not the point. The point is to get a sense of how precious Jesus actually is to us. One of the best ways to learn how valuable something is, is to ask yourself what would happen if you lost it. Mary teaches us this lesson. She realizes she may "lose" her Lord in the near future, and this drives the realization that He is the most precious thing in her life—worth more to her than any amount of money, and more than her best hopes for the future. It's a good question for us to consider as well. What would happen to me if I "lost" Jesus—if I suddenly no longer believed in Him, or enjoyed all the things He brings into my life?

It's a penetrating question. If a person can say, "It wouldn't actually change things that much for me," that's a pretty good indicator that they haven't actually "found" Jesus yet. When He really is Lord, Savior, Friend, Life-giver, and more, taking Him out of my life's equation would leave a huge hole.

This isn't an exercise you can do in a few minutes here at church. It deserves some time for meditation. So here's a homework assignment. This next week, take some extra time—even 15 or 20 minutes—and consider how your life would be impacted if you "lost" Jesus, and whether He really would be the hardest thing for you to let go. Make it part of your prayer time. Let it be part of preparing yourself for Easter. Because Easter is the time when we remember losing Jesus, and finding Him again, and when we celebrate how much He means to us.

## **(2) Follow Mary's example**

My second suggestion is: let Mary's example guide your spiritual disciplines, especially around Lent.

Some of us engage Lent quite seriously each year. Some may not think much about it. Both paths are OK. Go where the Spirit leads you. Paul gives us good direction in Romans when he tells us: *One*

*person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind (Rom 14:5).*

Lent is a useful tradition, not a biblical command. At the same time, we do all need to repent regularly of sin, to feel an appropriate sadness that Jesus had to pay such a heavy price for us, and to grow in the disciplines of service and self-denial as part of putting our Lord first. It's especially appropriate as we prepare our hearts for Good Friday and Easter.

These are healthy disciplines. But they can go astray. Too often, Christians have treated repentance, self-denial, and service as a way of earning God's favor, rather than responding to His goodness. And too often we let these things turn our faith into something depressing, grim, and unattractive. We forget that the fruit of the Spirit is not a mournful, negative attitude; it is joy and peace and thankfulness.

Mary is an excellent model of what the disciplines of Lent should be. Mary understood humility and sharing her Lord's sorrow. She knew what it meant to give up something precious—something much more precious than Black Forest cake or pedicures. But Mary also understood how very precious her Lord was, and her act of giving away what she valued was an act of worship, recognizing how much more valuable Jesus was to her. And I think it was offered with a sense of hope, because Mary also knew that Jesus was and is "the resurrection and the life." Beyond this time of difficulty there was a brighter future.

However we prepare ourselves for Easter in this Lenten season, I pray that we will follow Mary's lead. May our sadness be mingled with hope, and may the things we give (or give up) be joyful reminders that the Lord we love is more precious than anything else.