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## *Let Judas Go; Let Us Serve with Mary*

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**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler**  
**Atlanta, Georgia**  
**The Fifth Sunday of Lent**

*Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" He said this not because he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief. -John 12.3-6*

Mary's anointing of Jesus filled the house with the fragrance of perfume! What a glorious aroma!

I sensed something like that aroma when I was on the Arabian Peninsula six years ago. I was in the lovely country of Oman, way down on the southern edge of Arabia. In that country, and in many of the countries of the so-called Near East and Middle East, it is a great show of respect to burn incense when one receives a guest. In one grand home, I was a guest myself. At the front door, a great urn overflowed with the smoke of incense burning. My companions and I had to walk through that truly lavish fragrance before even entering the house.

My colleagues and I were honored to be there. This host was truly showing hospitality to us. "The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume."

In that setting, it would have been absolutely horrifying for someone to have blurted out, "Hey, why don't you get rid of all this incense and help the poor? What a waste of money!" Not only would it have been horrifying, it would have been nonsense.

Yet, those were the words of Judas, when the disciple Mary was showing such profound respect for Jesus, when she was opening a pound of costly perfume. When Mary was honoring Jesus, and when the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume, it was Judas who grumbled, "Hey, why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor."

I want to talk this morning about why Judas said that. The scriptures are clear. He did not say it because he cared about the poor. He said it because he was a thief.

What kind of "thief" was he? Judas was not necessarily a thief of money or material assets. In our world, there are thieves around us all the time, but I do not mean just the criminal type-the people who steal our material possessions. We know what they are like.

Rather, I mean the people who steal other, more non-tangible, items. There are thieves, for instance, who steal our time. There are thieves who steal our quiet. There are thieves who steal our party. There are thieves who steal our honor, or even our holiness.

This last example was the kind of thief that Judas was. As Mary was anointing Jesus with expensive perfume, what Judas stole was the holiness and the honor of the moment.

It is one of the inevitable features of households and communities that we always include those who want to steal our moments of honor. In our churches, there are those who want to steal our moments of honor.

Consider these examples: When we are honoring one person, say when we are honoring a young person, someone else will come up and say "Hey, why don't you honor this elderly person?" Later, when we are honoring the elderly, another person will rob the moment by saying, "Why don't you care about the children's ministries the way you care for the elderly?" When we teach about one subject, someone will argue that we should teach about another subject instead.

Or we hear this very question: "Why don't you care for the poor the way you are pouring out perfume for this dinner party?" And so Jesus said, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Here at the Cathedral of St. Philip, and at churches throughout the world, Christians do care for the poor, day in and day out. We participate in building projects, in food banks and food pantries, in homeless shelters, in medical clinics, and in social services that model renewal of our inner cities.

On one special day, we actually prepare a tremendous feast for the homeless, at the Homeless Requiem, on All Saints Day. At that feast, and on that day, we invite the homeless into this grand and glorious place of prayer and hospitality. And, yes, we have burned incense on that night.

We have learned an important thing on that night, and throughout the year: When we are caring for the poor, we are actually caring for Jesus Christ. Jesus is indeed with us. We have learned that the moment of glory, the moment of honor, the moment of holiness, is the moment we serve. The moment of holiness is the moment we serve anyone.

The moment of Mary's holiness was in her moment of serving Jesus. For us, it is especially when we serve the least of those among us, that we are serving Jesus.

Now, realize this: When the church honors Jesus Christ, we honor all parts of Jesus, not just the fun and comfortable elements of his life. We even honor his death.

Jesus said that Mary's perfume was for his burial. The nard was for the anointing of his body for burial. Recognizing the death of Jesus is part of honoring Jesus Christ. That is why we read this anointing story just days before we observe Good Friday.

In the church, a funeral, any funeral, is a holy event. It is sad, yes, and sometimes overwhelmingly tragic. But it is finally holy. We honor life. We honor death. We honor new life.

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That is the rhythm of our celebration. That is the Jesus dance, the Jesus music, the Jesus rhythm at our celebrations. That is the invitation, the invitation in the shape of the cross, that comes to all of us. We are invited to this celebration of life, death, and new life. We are called to this dinner party of Jesus Christ our Lord.

This will be our rhythm next week, as we begin Holy Week. Life, Death, and New Life—from Palm Sunday to Good Friday to Easter Sunday. Our Lord Jesus Christ went through that entire pattern, that entire rhythm. We honor Jesus when we honor life, death, and new life.

There are always some who show up only to rob and steal. They are Judas. We will speak of him in Holy Week, too. The one who interrupts this honoring of Jesus. The one who interrupts our celebration of life, or death, or new life. The one who interrupts our service. The one who finds something wrong at the party. The one who cannot celebrate because of some bitterness or misfortune. That is Judas, the betrayer, the one who does not really care for the poor, but who is a thief, who comes only to rob and to steal.

As I speak, all of us are probably imagining the Judases in our own life. Oh, I know who the preacher is talking about! He is referring to so and so. But Judas is not just in those around us.

There is a Judas inside each of us, too. For how many times have we, we ourselves, been the negative factor at a celebration or party? How many times have we been unable to serve because we were really worried about something else?

How many times have we failed to appreciate the Lord's presence because we were too attached to the old? Something else was claiming our attention. Something else was robbing us of the holiness of the moment.

This Holy Week, God invites us to put away the other claims on our lives. Many of those claims are quite legitimate. Put them away to honor Jesus. Put them away to honor life, death, and new life. Let the Judas go.

For, there is also a Mary inside each of us. There is a Mary who wants to honor the moment with a most passionate and sensuous gesture. There is a Mary who wants to let down her hair and serve. There is a Mary inside each of us who wants to honor life, honor death, and honor new life, with the fullest passion we can muster, with an overwhelming fragrance that fills the house, the fragrance of service.

AMEN.

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