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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Fifth Sunday in Lent
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Lectionary Year C: John 12:1-8

It's safe to say that being a consumer two thousand years ago would look and feel much different from now. We've long lived with advertising, marketing, and big-box stores -- all scientifically engineered to our wants, needs, and insecurities. But in biblical times, there would've been merchants and marketplaces...and that was about it. About the only similarity to today would be the fact that the consumer's purchasing capability drove commerce. And yes, some people had more money than others and some things could be quite expensive.

An obvious example of this appears in this morning's Gospel text. The perfume with which Mary anointed Jesus' feet is said to be "costly" and "made of pure nard" (12:3a), which would speak of how extraordinary Mary's gesture of hospitality was. As an aside, I must point out that, because "nard" rhymes with "lard", I get a less-than-pleasant image in my head when I read this text. At last, I decided to look up "nard," and discovered that it's an essential oil extracted from the flowering plant Nardostachys jatamansi, but, beyond that, I can only conclude that, aside from how costly it was, its scent, too, would've been overwhelming. Today's consumer probably would've chosen a different act of hospitality and something different with which to express it. But this, in its time, was a big deal, and John the Evangelist wants us to know

that.

Another interesting sidebar would be to note artistic depictions of Mary from the pre- and early-Renaissance eras; in them, you will find that Mary has very long hair. Why? Because she would've needed it to wipe all that oil off of Jesus' feet. However, I have yet to find a satisfactory explanation for Mary's use of her own hair instead of some kind of linen that might've been available at the time. A number of contemporary interpretations I've heard play up the sensual aspects of such an act, but, beyond being merely provocative, there's nothing to indicate -- to me, at least -- that using her own hair was necessary. Who knows? It might've been an act of humility at the time, with no connotation of sensuality whatsoever...

Of course, what really ought to stick from this text is the image of extravagance -- the costliness of the perfume and the liberality with which Mary applied it are the enduring hallmarks that preachers and congregations have gone away with for centuries. But humans haven't always done so well with extravagance. For example, I can think of at least a few weddings that were perceived as extravagant, and, ever after, the extravagance was juicy town gossip. Was that really necessary? No. It is not -- and never was -- anyone else's business!

A figure in this story who plays that sort of role is Judas; here, he asks, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (12:5). Let's face it -- this is

just obnoxious and nitpicky to point out, and we know that Judas would've stirred up more gossip on the matter whenever he could. But, helpfully, the Gospel of John features little tidbits from an omniscient narrator, adding, parenthetically: "He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it" (12:6). Now we know that, at best, Judas was smarmy and insincere.

You, as a consumer, are likely familiar with the concept of "knowing the price of everything but the value of nothing." This comes from the reality that there are people who can't distinguish between that which is genuinely good or bad despite knowing what virtually everything costs; often, the only thing they deem "good" is that which is cheapest. These would be the people who, when shopping for a car in 1986, chose the Yugo...that then-Yugoslavian-made derivative of a compact Italian Fiat that was put together so poorly that it's impossible to find a running example today. You could ask them, "Why did you buy a Yugo?" They would answer, "Because it was cheap!"

Would Judas have bought a Yugo? Probably. That would've allowed him to hoard more money from the common purse.

Being a consumer, thus, is very interesting in light of this morning's text. We see something expensive -- and valuable -- handled with apparent carelessness. But lest we, like Judas, seek only to criticize Mary for what seems like a bad decision, we need to evaluate that which is worthy and worthless, without consideration of

its cost in dollars and cents. For Mary, cost wasn't an object; the act is what mattered. Obviously, to throw expensive things around carelessly all the time is unwise, but we know, too, that on special occasions we get out the good stuff. This was for Jesus, after all, and with this anointing we look forward to, as Jesus indicates, his burial. Listen to how he quickly silences the nit-picking Judas: "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial" (12:7). Expensive things are often for important things...for those occasions and moments that demand a certain dignity and respectability, like a formal dinner, a Presidential visit, and, yes, a burial. So now we could say that Mary's apparent extravagance was actually a treatment befitting her Lord.

But Mary's extravagant consumption of this costly perfume is a witness to that which she values, and certainly, we can find parallels to this in our own lives. We used to say that a glance through our checkbook register showed us what we valued based on what we spent our money on; nowadays, of course, it would be the credit card statement -- which is not on paper but appears online -- and some credit card companies will even helpfully break down your spending into categories. Mine, for some reason, always has "automotive" taking up a big piece of the pie graph...

The outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020 revealed rather bizarre developments in people's habits of consumption; looming threats of scarcity motivated people to hoard, which, in itself, is an unhealthy be-

havior -- pandemic or not. On a personal note, if you ever bump into me out shopping, you'll notice that the most I'll use for the items I'm going to purchase is a basket, because, you know, shopping carts are for hoarders! But in all seriousness, Mary anointing Jesus' feet reminds us that the biggest, best, most expensive, greatest quantity, or highest quality belongs only to the things that really matter.

Your family, your relationships, the people around you...

So, we ask ourselves, "Do we treat them with the same extravagance that we might be inclined to treat ourselves with?" And sometimes, these things that we need to evaluate in ourselves aren't so easy to evaluate. That's why we ask God for the wisdom to sort these things out -- and yes, over time, God will give us this wisdom, as long as we listen patiently for it.

In fact, God "anoints" us with something that's beyond costly -- it's priceless. In Holy Baptism, we are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever, and, not surprisingly, in our baptismal rite, we anoint the person to be baptized with oil. And sometimes, you may see this oil used liberally...extravagantly, which echoes the extravagance of not only Mary anointing Jesus' feet, but also God's blessing to us, even when we don't ask for it.

So today, let us think about both what we consume and what we receive. Let us consume moderately, but let us receive extravagantly, especially when God is offering us his best -- Jesus Christ. Mortals like Mary and us can only bring out the finest product or

craft, but God can give us his Son as the most extravagant and undeserved gift of all. Through Jesus, that gift is salvation and eternal life, and today, we look forward, to his burial, to Good Friday where he suffered death and was buried...not as a mere act of execution by a Roman governor, but as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world and for the rescue from sin and death themselves.

May we ever receive this gift, and share it extravagantly, remembering how Mary anointed Jesus' feet. We have been given so much in Christ alone that there's plenty of grace, peace, love, and forgiveness to go around.

Amen.