

John 12.1-11

performance art

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Performance art is odd and often abrasive. Ideas that can't be contained on canvas are performed; some would rather drop the designation art and call it *performance* or *protest*. Three people sit on a public bench, legs chained, eyes blindfolded and mouths stuffed with rags. On the bright balloons rising from their legs is written, "Free speech now!" A woman stands on a busy street corner and suddenly falls across the sidewalk, with blood all over her chest, blocking the path of those trying to get to work. Black lives matter is scrawled on a poster. Whether this is art or not, you can decide; but it does get our attention and occasionally causes some folks to think more deeply.

Is Mary a performance artist? I think so.

What happens at the dinner party in Bethany has the same effect as performance art. Mary, knowing that Jesus is moving toward his own death, anoints Jesus' feet with the most expensive perfume available. Anointing is proper to a Jewish burial rite. We know what is coming and so does Mary. The stench of death is in the room and on the horizon, and likely remembered upon Lazarus, resuscitated only 3 days ago. Mary does with Improvisation calls "Yes and": yes there is death, AND there is more. She ensures that the fragrance of love will fill the house and with tenderness dries his feet with her hair, so her body will retain his memory. Like performance art, not everyone understood what she was doing. Jesus did and he said so; Judas didn't and neither did the disciples. Their complaint still echoes among us.

Judas gets the bad rap for all the others who think the same thing. They just don't say it. He at least has the courage to say it. Enough of this extravagant cost! Give it to the poor. Maybe Judas quotes the prophet Isaiah, "share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless into your homes. Cover the naked and open your lives to the afflicted." Or maybe, as John suggests, this was a smokescreen to cover his deception. All we know is Judas provides a window into the heart of one who is gradually falling away from Jesus. We do well to listen carefully to him before we banish him with a haughty eye. I have empathy for him. His heart is drifting away from the one essential thing: uncalculated love for Jesus. Neither Judas nor any of the disciples will stay by Jesus side in the end. They all betray him. Mary, who shocks them all with her extravagant love, is there in the end.

In Mark's account of the same event, Jesus says remember her. Why?

Why indeed? She gives extravagantly from the depths of her heart and the resources at hand. *Mary holds nothing back*, giving the most costly gift of all, not the perfume, but her absolute love and devotion. Now, not later.

Her extravagant love makes me wonder if being a disciple of Jesus cost us anything? I don't mean in the narrow sense of your pocketbook, though that might be a place for some to start. I'm thinking of what it costs to be a lover of Jesus in this world? Mary's giving was not just about expensive perfume; remember, performance art points to something else. What is that something else?

I think Mary's performance art points to the *shocking, extravagant* love of God for the whole world. ***Her action reveals Jesus' action.*** That's why we remember her. Good people often get into quarrels over mission vs. worship. But what if Jesus had done a cost-benefit analysis before the redemption of the world? Are these people worth it? What if the Father had calculated the cost of the new robes and the fatted calf before embracing his weary son home from the far country? If God operates on a cost-benefit analysis then we are lost forever. Sunk in our sin. The Good News is the *extravagant love* at the center of Jesus death on a cross. Without this extravagant love for sinners, the cross becomes a meaningless, routine act of criminal execution.

Mary opens her heart to love. Then she takes the risk of love. She is the mirror of Jesus, who opens his heart to us, becoming vulnerable and taking the risk of love at the cost of his own life. No holding back. On the cross. All in.

Will you open your heart to this love?

When the performance artist finishes her scandalous act, a fragrance fills the whole house. It will linger on her body, too. Imagine we – the followers of Jesus - are performance artists. What if the costly acts of love we offer to others are the very acts that leave God's saving fragrance in this world; a world noxious with the smell of death? What if each expression of compassion, every gesture of mercy, every wound mended is like the costly perfume poured on the feet of Jesus? I think something like this extravagant love is why Jesus tells us to remember Mary who gave it all for love.

Amazing love, costly love, this is Jesus, God's beloved Son, broken and poured out for us. This is the fragrance that saves the world.

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In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.