

THE CHOICES WE MAKE

TEXT: John 12:1-8

We all make many choices in the course of our lives. Some of those choices are wise and lead us to worthwhile endeavors. Some of those choices make deep and lasting consequences for ourselves and perhaps for others. Today's short eight verses tell us about two such choices.

The first part of our lesson for today brings Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, back into Jesus' life as he journeys toward Jerusalem. Yes, I know that the other gospel writers hinted that the Mary in this story was a prostitute, or perhaps she was Mary Magdalene, but John identifies her otherwise. Mary has a very precious item, a jar of pure nard. Nard is an aromatic and expensive oil and Mary's choice to use it as a gift exceeded extravagance. A pound of the perfume would have been valued at about the yearly income of a manual laborer. Mary's choice to use this valuable oil to anoint Jesus' feet exceeded good taste and her choice to use her hair to wipe his feet lends an intimacy to the story. It was an expression of the deep love that she held for the man who had brought her brother back from death.

Mary's choice was an act of great cost, but it was even more a choice of great audacity. Did she really have to use her hair as a towel? Couldn't one of the disciples find a dish cloth, or a handkerchief, or something less offensive, less suggestive, than Mary's long black hair to wipe the perfume from Jesus feet?

More than likely, Mary could have used a towel if she had wanted to. But she chose to throw caution to the wind, risk her reputation, and spend a whole lot of money on a lavish act of devotion.

Jesus was traveling with his disciples, nearing Jerusalem, when he stopped to spend a little time with his dear friends. The disciples were in the room as Martha provided a meal, as was her custom, her gift to this long-time friend and those who

traveled with him. Watching from the sidelines were the disciples, among them the one called Judas Iscariot.

Judas had made a commitment to Jesus, and we have no reason to think he was anything but sincere in his faith. Like the rest of the disciples, he left everything to follow Jesus and was actively involved in ministry. He walked with Jesus for three years. He was a gospel preacher. When Jesus fed the 5,000, Judas was there. He took the bread and distributed it along with the other disciples. When Jesus calmed the storm, Judas was there. And he was there when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. So what happened to Judas? What caused him to change? What motivated his choice to betray the man he had followed?

Well, there was another side to Judas. As the “treasurer” for the disciples, he held the common purse, the funds that Jesus and his disciples used for their ministry. He was known as a miser – and suspected as a thief. The other disciples were sure that he stole from money that was entrusted to him.

So Judas was there in Bethany, at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, along with Jesus and the other 11 disciples. And he watched as Mary anointed Jesus’ feet with the expensive nard. And he bristled at Mary’s costly choice. He grumbled under his breath that she should have sold the oil and given the money to the poor. Had she made that choice, Judas would have put those proceeds into the purse he carried and we can well imagine the choice he then might have made. Somewhere in the events of that evening Judas made a choice that was to bring about a cataclysmic result.

We will not ever know for sure what his motives were for the choice he made, but later that week Judas led soldiers to the Garden of Gethsemane, where he identified Jesus by kissing him and calling him “Rabbi”. For his betrayal, Judas was paid 30 pieces of silver by the church authorities. According to the Gospel of Matthew, Judas immediately regretted his actions and returned the pay-off money to those authorities, saying “I have

sinned by betraying innocent blood”. When the authorities dismissed him Judas is said to have left the coins on the floor, and committed suicide by hanging himself.

Life is full of choices. Sometimes we forget how very many choices we have to make in life. There are big choices, of course: should I marry this person? Should I get married at all? Should I choose this career or that one? Should I make my home here, where I grew up, or follow my curiosity to other parts of the world?

Every day, our lives are full of small choices too. Pasta or chicken for dinner? Small, medium or large soda? Debit or credit? Paper or plastic? Choice is a standard part of life.

Most of our choices are of little consequence in the grand scheme of life, but some of them have huge importance. We’ve all been at a crossroad in life and, looking back, we think, “That was definitely the right decision”, or “Looking back, I wish I had taken a different path”.

Judas’ betrayal, of course, led to Jesus’ arrest, trial and death by crucifixion, after which he was resurrected, a sequence of events that – according to Christian tradition – brought salvation to humanity. But the name “Judas” became synonymous with treachery in various languages, and Judas Iscariot would be portrayed in Western art and literature as the archetypal traitor and false friend. Dante’s *Inferno* famously doomed Judas to the lowest circle in Hell.

Robert Cargill, assistant professor of classics and religious studies at the University of Iowa and editor of *Biblical Archaeology Review*, notes, “The truth is we don’t know why Judas did what he did. The grand irony, of course, is that without Judas’ betrayal, Jesus doesn’t get handed over to the Romans and crucified. Without Judas, you don’t have the central component of Christianity – you don’t have the Resurrection.”

Judas is a contradictory character: he is one of Jesus' disciples, yet he is about to betray him. Unlike Mary's intentions, Judas' secret motivations are made known to the reader. His concern for the poor is merely a ruse to cover his own greed. John's Gospel insists on this difficulty: Jesus is handed over not by an enemy or stranger but by one of his intimate associates. True loyalty and honesty are not prerequisites for discipleship. For Judas, who is seated at dinner with Jesus and his friends and has charge of the common purse, is a thief and betrayer.

The story of Mary's anointing stands in contrast to the idea of many Christians today that what matters most is belief in Jesus – and by belief we mean conscious, doctrinal understanding of Jesus. Mary's faithful action is different. John does not tell us what she believes, and it seems beyond human comprehension that she could understand all that will happen to Jesus, and all that her actions evoke. Yet we see her enact a faith that resonates deeply with what we know of Jesus' kingship and his death.

Today we are less than two weeks before the Passover. By her extravagant act Mary introduces Jesus to anyone who does not know who he is. Judas makes his choice to forget who he is. There are plotters, betrayers, and bystanders in this story. Each one of them, and each one of us must make the choice whether to follow Jesus as he continues on his journey to Jerusalem and, ultimately to the cross, or whether we will turn away and reject the Savior of the World. It is the most meaningful choice we can make. Amen