

Lesson 2 (Jeremiah 32:1-10; John 12:1-8)

Devotional Meditation: Risky Discipleship

Rev. Stephen P. Greggo PsyD

If I were to ask you to share about the best financial investment you ever made; my prediction is that it would not take long to name it and tell its story: a house, land, an heirloom, Facebook stock options before it became a household term; a retirement plan, or a simple bank account. (If I am being honest, the question might be easier if I asked about the worse financial investment; but that would take us to a devotional for another day.) When it comes to investing-putting something aside for the future-there is a built-in realization of risk. Keep that element; risk for long term return; but let's refocus the question: What is the riskiest ministry investment you have taken and how has it paid dividends? Our Scripture lessons this evening show us risky steps of discipleship. If we equate shalom (peace) with the absence of risk, effort, or intentionality, we have not paid attention to passages such as these.

““Leave her alone,” Jesus replied. “It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial.”

Last Lord's Day we read together the account of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Taylor pointed out that this is a memorable miracle because after four days of a tomb retreat; Lazarus was no longer fit to return to life as we know it. Let's add another factor to what makes that passage so vivid on our inner mental screen: Jesus takes a major ministry risk. There is an ever-increasing tension between Jesus and the Jewish leaders. Jesus may have won the “I am the light of the World” debate by literally opening the eyes of the blind, but the Pharisees were secretly plotting his demise. They knew how to win a political skirmish under Roman occupation. For Jesus, it was ridiculously risky to come this close to Jerusalem and perform such a stunning and public miracle. Why not a subtle one such as playing with a young boy's lunch? Come on Jesus; there was no need to be so flashy and draw attention. Bring a stinking corpse out of the tomb, still wrapped in its linen clothes? Now that is really over the top.

The Scripture this evening from John's Gospel takes us back to the scene of that big moment (Bethany) and the dinner guest of honor is the one who actually saw the other side and came back to tell the story. Can you imagine the dinner conversation? This would not be the same old stories of sheep, goats, or the Rabbi's latest message. Jesus and Lazarus are reclining at the table, and there are plenty of notable guests gathered all around, some center stage such as Judas, John the beloved disciple, Mary and, hosts of curious onlookers ready to tweet the latest and stir up more controversy. If the internet had been around, there is no doubt that clips from this scene would go viral.

Jesus knows that the cross is ahead for him. The disciples have an inkling, remember Thomas saying, “Let's go with him that we also may die with him.” I doubt that doubting Thomas knew

the full measure of his words but suffering, death, and a tomb were becoming more prominent on the horizon.

Somehow, Mary was in tune with the critical feature of this moment. The gathered diners were enjoying a soup supper and sharing the high points at this celebration of life. Yes, that's what funeral services are generally tagged today but this one with Lazarus, seating at the head table, certainly would stand out. Watch what you say about this dead guy because he came back to engage in the conversation! This is a neat trick.

Mary was spiritually aware, dedicated, and passionate. She knew when it was best to sit at Jesus' feet and absorb his Word. In this moment, she knows that looking back to the greatest miracle of all time was not the place to aim attention. Rather, her vision and heart were totally absorbed with what was ahead. How could she demonstrate that she understood the meaning of this moment? How could she honor this guest, not for what her Lord had already done for her but for what he was about to do for the entire human race? Mary knew what this dinner was all about and hearing her brother tell about bright lights at the end of a tunnel was not where the action should be. She took a discipleship risk and put her faith into action.

Picture the scene as a large banquet where the main guests are lying around the central table. Bits of bread are broken and dipped into sauces and prepared dishes. Villagers are welcome to listen and eavesdrop as they sit around the edges. This gives Mary the opportunity to do something that no-one else could possibly imagine. She takes an expensive container of nard, a precious and fragrant oil, and begins to wash and massage Jesus' feet. She uses her hair to rub and absorb the oil. If this is hard to take in given the customs of our day, keep in mind that this was no ordinary behavior even in the days of our Lord. There is no opportunity this evening to push further into the background of Mary's actions or how this passage ties to other Gospel accounts. My reading is that Mary, here in her home court, is re-enacting a scene that has occurred on another occasion. Memories are stirred all around and certainly speculation is running wild.

Judas captures the bitter thought of the business minded and those with heads bent on practicality. Outrageous! That stuff is 'out of sight' costly. Where did she get it? Was that the vile purchased to anoint Lazarus so he would not stink? Was it an inheritance that she was now squandering? Why break out that vile *this* evening? Could not this valuable item be sold, and more pragmatic uses be found for the gains? The poor need more food. The disciples could enjoy better accommodations when during the supper planned for after Jesus' donkey ride? Come on Jesus, look at the waste, the humiliation of this woman, and the scandal of you letting this all happen.

Jesus interrupts the useless and dark chatter. Sometimes it is wise to stop the clamoring and arguments about the '*woulda, coulda, and shoulda.*' Jesus grounds the occasion in reality. His thinking, and that of Mary, are actually on the same page. Passion week is approaching. The end of this three-year ministry tour is around the corner. The curtain is about to raise on a scene

when the Word become Flesh will fulfill the most incredible and demanding act of redemption. This cannot be contemplated by even the greatest theological imagination.

“Leave her alone,” Jesus replied. “It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.”

Jesus connects this occasion to the tomb. It will soon be time to wrap my broken body in linen cloth, lay it in a cave, and spread expensive oils around to cover up the stench. I have a journey to travel that no one here can possibly foresee.

Jesus affirms Mary’s risky worship. He applauds her devotion, her act of discipleship, her humility and spiritual attentiveness. She gets it. Will his disciples? Will we?

In considering this spiritual investment, this risky action, this demonstration of devotion and faith vision, I was considering how to place this active and deliberate aspect of discipleship.

Rituals. These are special activities which we approach with a sense of awe and awareness of an underlying heavenly concept. Lent began with ashes placed on our foreheads. We come to the Lord’s Supper to remember his body broken for us; his blood shed for us, we say good-bye to our loved ones in ways that will help us to remember and grieve. Wedding vow making is a big deal. The Lord awakens a sense of awe, wonder, by making his presence known.

Routines. These are the activities we engage in daily, weekly, or regularly to practice our faith. We begin the day by deliberately pausing when we open our eyes to thank the Lord for a new day and give it over to him. We pray before meals, read a passage of Scripture, show kindness to others, take on pleasant as well as unpleasant tasks in grateful awareness that life is a blessing. We come to worship with our brothers and sisters in Christ. God meets us and speaks with us in these routines.

Risks (Ministry Enactments). These are ministry investments offered to create hope in the future. These are unusual and perhaps difficult things that we do to honor a direction or vision that the Lord lays on our hearts. We do an act of kindness for another who does not expect it: write a card, make a meal, watch a child. We agree beyond all sensibility to go visit a prison and try to minister to a damaged soul. We agree to stand up and teach in a place we do not know or to a people who we barely understand. We wash the Lord’s feet with expensive oil where all will see, so that his death will be known and understood as God’s way to take care of our costly debt. We invest in a ministry that will bear results in the future. Not everyone will understand, but Jesus does.

This evening I am going to ask you to share about how a ministry at St. Mark has blessed you either by your participation or your investment. Whether you attend this ministry as part of your weekly routine of discipleship or as a risk in providing leadership to enact your service to the Lord, share a word of gratitude and appreciation. We will then pray for these ministries.