



**THE SIGNATURE GIFT**  
**John 11:55-John 12:8**

During the recent Winter Olympics in Vancouver, British Columbia, we were bombarded with ads about the 'Signature Card' or the 'Signature Event' or the 'Signature Athlete.' Today, we focus in on the 'Signature Gift' shared by the Jewish maiden Mary in our lesson today. She is moved to share a signature or sacrificial gift with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Following the dramatic event of the raising of Lazarus from the dead – we come to our appointed lesson today – the Anointing of Jesus by Mary.

In John's gospel – there are three Passover events that are shared with us. The Passover is closely linked to the Exodus – the 'signature event' in the Jewish faith. The Exodus motif is central to John's gospel linking it to our 'new Exodus' from sin and death in Jesus. It is John's gospel that describes Jesus as the 'Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.'

The raising of Lazarus from the dead has created quite a stir in the neighborhood – and rightly so. It is not every day a 'signature miracle' of this significance takes place.

Jesus has already shared with his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and die. In the midst of the gathering storm clouds that will soon surround our Lord – comes this story of singular grace and beauty.

We have learned from the closing verses of **chapter 11** that the chief priests and teachers of the law were looking for a way to arrest Jesus and kill him. However, the crowds were still with him. It did not take a rocket scientist to realize that the powers of darkness we wrestle against were at work.

All it takes is for love to be at work – and evil will raise its ugly head. You could probably read the body language of these folks. Jesus probably saw the curled lip – the quiet whispers – the venom of hatred in their eyes. It left anything but a sweet fragrance in the air. Self-righteousness and legalism have always been the greatest threats to our faith.

Dr. M. Scott Peck, in his provocative book, **THE PEOPLE OF THE LIE**, shares: "Since the primary motive of evil is disguise – one of the places evil people are most likely to be found is within the church. Evil people tend to gravitate towards piety for the disguise and concealment it can offer them."<sup>1</sup> (**II Corinthians 11:14**)

The setting for our lesson today is a meal in the home of Lazarus. We know that the home of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha had been a safe and special place for our Lord to gather for rest and renewal with his disciples. At this meal Jesus does get angry and upset – but it is not at Mary. The rebuke is given to the disciples – especially Judas Iscariot. Lazarus is at table with our Lord – breaking bread together – a sure sign they were United Methodists. Imagine the conversations about life and death – mission and ministry they were sharing and reflecting upon.

Mary is criticized for her extravagance – because the money could have been used to feed the poor. Jesus responds by saying – they will always have an opportunity to express their concern for those in need – but at this moment she was expressing a greater need – a need to satisfy the deepest longings of the heart and spirit – to express devotion to God. For the past eleven chapters Jesus had taught them to reach out and help others – so that is not really the issue here. This woman deeply invested herself into the Kingdom Jesus is opening up to all people.

She has transferred her greatest loyalties to Christ – and not to Caesar and his ways – and this was the rub for Judas. Some folks seem to know **“the price of everything – and the value of nothing.”** This is the reason why this story is so challenging to me – as one whose life is caught up in the administrative structure of the church. There is a fine line between price and value which only the Holy Spirit can give us. Satan knows these concepts of price and value as well.

The great teacher of preachers, Dr. Fred Craddock, tells of growing up during the depression and how often money was not in great supply for his family. The family had to move to town to seek work. Every able family member tried to find some work to earn money. The family kept a cigar box on the kitchen table where all the funds that were earned were kept in order that his mother could pay the rent and buy the necessary food items. However, once in a while his Dad on a Friday night would take the money and go to town and buy his wife a box of chocolate or a beautiful rose. She would always fuss and tell her husband that they did not have the funds.

One day his father shared something that he never forgot. He said to Mrs. Craddock, **“When our lives are defined by what goes in and out of that ‘box,’ we will then be poor people. Life would have then robbed us of our joy.”**

The same principle works in the Christian church. When our church’s success is defined by what goes in and out of the offering plate – then we too have allowed our lives to be stripped of the joy of our salvation. Our success is measured by how many people we can bring and usher into the transforming presence of Jesus Christ.

A distinguished colleague, Donald J. Shelby of Santa Monica, CA, shared a rebuke into true Christian giving he received from a poor widow in his church family. This dear soul had not experienced an easy life. She struggled with a painful debilitating disease – yet made it to church every Sunday. Her apartment was the

second floor on top of a converted garage. She wore the same shoes and dress week after week. She lived on Social Security and a very small pension. However, when there was a special need or special offering for a missionary – she was the first to respond. Her pledge card was always the first to be returned to the church office. When the church launched a building drive for a new sanctuary – once again her pledge card was the first to be returned. She pledged an extraordinary amount. He went to visit her – believing that she had over-extended herself. When he shared the reason for his visit – this is what she said:

**“Every morning I sit at this little table and I sing, ‘Holy, holy, holy,’ as a kind of benediction to this little place. Then I ask God to help me live from the heart, to do what my heart tells me to do. I have done that for many years, and although I have lost much and had to relinquish loved ones, my health, my home and most of my possessions, I have discovered that the only thing I cannot lose is what I give. Please do not take that away from me! Listen to your heart and you will know why I am giving what I am. Receive what I want to give in the spirit in which I give it.”<sup>2</sup>**

Her gift was not based on arithmetic – but adoration for the Father’s love. Remember that the next time we sing, “Father, we love you, we worship and adore you.” Do we really love and adore him?

The late Dr. William Barclay wrote **“Love is not love if it calculates the cost. It gives all and its only regret is that it has not still more to give.”** There is no smaller package than that of a person or institution wrapped up in itself.<sup>3</sup>

Our love for what God has done for us in Jesus Christ is not to be grudgingly given and measured out by a drop here and a drop there. We are to pour it out – and let it bring refreshment and renewal for all that it touches. Now there is a big difference between treating ourselves to the best – and sharing with someone else the best we have to give.

The story teaches us that no loving act of devotion or kindness done for our Lord is ever wasted. It has an economy and time-line all its own. Mary’s life was full of the joy of the Lord – and it just overflowed from her life into the world. Please notice church – that unlike other biblical characters – such as the rich, young ruler and the Pharisees – she does not go away sad or plotting someone’s demise. She invested her life in God’s purposes rather than isolating herself from God’s platform. Which of these actions and attitudes leaves a fragrance that you would want to flavor your life and church and community with?

In 1995, an 88 year old African-American grandmother gave the University of Southern Mississippi a gift of \$150,000.00. She worked all her life – washing clothes for other people. Her name was Oseola McCarty. What made the gift so significant was the fact that for many years African-Americans were not even allowed to attend that school. Where does someone learn to live and love like that?

Be careful about what fragrance we allow to flow from us to the world. We have the witness of Mary of Bethany – Mrs. McCarty from Mississippi – or Judas Iscariot. Two lived a life of joy – the other is a kill-joy. The Pharisees are plotting are to get rid of Jesus – Mary simply pledges her life to him and his kingdom. Mary yields and surrenders everything to Jesus – Judas simply wants to use Jesus for his selfish and puny purposes. Mary is not concerned if her gift is economical – but worthy.

Recently, a low budget film entitled **THE BLIND SIDE** based on a little-known book by the same title, made a big splash at the Academy Awards. Some of you saw it – and told me it was a good flick – inspiring.

It tells the story of how one white family in the Memphis area shared the gift of a home and family with an African-American youth. They lived out their faith and shared ‘the signature gift’ of God’s love. This young man found a place of refuge and safety in their family. Because of it, he blossomed into a wonderful young man now playing for the Baltimore Ravens. The father of the family who took the youngster in said, “The movie showed the importance of giving rather than taking.” This is what Mary and Jesus demonstrated 2,000 years ago. It is the gift that keeps on giving.

As Jesus poured out his life without counting the cost – so our world is blessed and enriched by those who follow in that tradition and spirit. I often remind and share with our leaders here at EUM that this church is by far the greatest giving church I have ever served. This church has blessed so many because of those members and attenders who reflect the spirit and life of Jesus and Mary of Bethany – and others who keep that blessed example. My friend and yours, Lowell Roth, often shares “You cannot out-give God.”

We never know how deeply our gifts touch the lives of other people. The wealth of many kings, princes, queens, and celebrities has faded away, “but whenever the gospel is preached throughout the world what she has done will also be told in memory of her.” Pontius Pilate tried to wash his hands to get rid of Jesus – Mary used her hands to love and adore him. What are we using our hands for?

Mary uses her hands to bless and enrich the life of faith. Judas uses his hands to betray and diminish the life of faith.

What is the ‘signature gift’ you want your legacy and life to be defined by?

Reverend Eric S. Ritz  
March 21, 2010 – preached at both services  
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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> M. Scott Peck, **THE PEOPLE OF THE LIE: Hope for Healing the Human Heart**, Simon & Schuster, 1983, notes on pages 76-77.

<sup>2</sup> Donald J. Shelby, First United Methodist Church, Santa Monica, CA, now retired.

<sup>3</sup> William Sloane Coffin, **CREDO**, Westminster/John Knox Press, 2003.