

BROKEN AND SPILLED OUT

John 12:1-8

The elderly and pious Protestant sisters Martine and Philippa live in a small village on the remote western coast of Jutland in 19th-century Denmark. Their father was a pastor who founded his own Pietistic sect. With their father now dead and the austere sect drawing no new converts, the aging sisters preside over a dwindling congregation of white-haired believers.

The story flashes back 49 years, showing the sisters in their youth. The beautiful girls have many suitors, but their father rejects them all, and indeed ridicules marriage. Each daughter is courted by an impassioned suitor visiting Jutland – Martine by a charming young Swedish cavalry officer, and Philippa by a star baritone, from the Paris opera, on break to the silence of the coast. Both sisters decide to stay with their father and spurn any life away from Jutland.

Thirty-five years later, Babette Hersant appears at their door. She carries only a letter of introduction from the opera singer, explaining that she is a refugee from counter-revolutionary bloodshed in Paris and recommending her as a housekeeper. The sisters cannot afford to take Babette in, but she offers to work for free. Babette serves as their cook for the next 14 years, producing an improved version of the bland meals typical of the self-denying nature of the congregation and slowly gaining their respect. Her only link to her former life is a lottery ticket that a friend in Paris renews for her every year. One day, she wins the lottery of 10,000 francs. Instead of using the money to return to Paris and her lost lifestyle, she decides to spend it preparing a delicious dinner for the sisters and their small congregation on the occasion of the founding pastor's hundredth birthday. More than just a feast, the meal is an outpouring of Babette's appreciation, an act of self-sacrifice. Babette tells no one that she is spending her entire winnings on the meal.

The sisters accept both Babette's meal and her offer to pay for the creation of a "real French dinner". Babette arranges for her nephew to go to Paris and gather the supplies for the feast. The ingredients are plentiful, sumptuous, and exotic, and their arrival causes much discussion among the villagers. As the various never-before-seen ingredients arrive and preparations commence, the sisters begin to worry that the meal will become a sin of sensual luxury, if not some form of devilry. In a hasty conference, the sisters and the congregation agree to eat the meal, but to forgo speaking of any pleasure in it and to make no mention of the food during the dinner.

Martine's former suitor, now a famous general married to a member of the Queen's court, comes as the guest of his aunt, the local lady of the manor and a member of the old pastor's congregation. He is unaware of the other guests' austere plans and as a man of the world and former attaché in Paris, he is the only person at the table qualified to comment on the meal. He regales the guests with abundant information about the extraordinary food and drink, comparing it to a meal he enjoyed years earlier at the famous Café Anglais in Paris. Although the other celebrants refuse to comment on the earthly pleasures of their meal, Babette's gifts break down their distrust and superstitions, elevating them physically and spiritually. Old wrongs are forgotten, ancient loves are rekindled, and a mystical redemption of the human spirit settles over the table.

The sisters assume that Babette will now return to Paris. However, when she tells them that all of her money is gone and that she is not going anywhere, the sisters are aghast. Babette then reveals that she was formerly the head chef of the Café Anglais and tells them that dinner for 12 there has a price of 10,000 francs. Martine tearfully says, "Now you will be poor the rest of your life", to which Babette replies, "An artist is never poor." Philippa then says: "But this is not the end, Babette. In paradise you will be the great artist God meant you to be" and then embraces her with tears in her eyes saying: "Oh, how you will enchant the angels!" which is precisely how the short story ends.

All of this prepares us to hear the gospel reading. Jesus, in the last days of his life, is in the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, sitting at the table. Mary takes a pound of "costly perfume made of pure nard," which was a fragrant, imported oil. We soon learn from Judas' remark that the jar could have been sold for 300 denarii, which was nearly a year's pay for a working man. But Mary "wastes" it, pouring it on Jesus' feet.

It wasn't uncommon in those days to anoint the *head* of a guest as a sign of respect, but in those cases, only a few drops of oil would normally be used. The pouring of lavish amounts of oil — again, on the head — was the kind of anointing that was considered sacred, and it was usually reserved for designating someone as a king or priest. The anointing marked that person for divine service. So, while we have no way of knowing exactly what Mary was thinking, her action expresses more than simple respect for Jesus; it seems to express her conviction that Jesus is the Messiah. But perhaps she poured the oil on his feet because she didn't consider herself worthy to anoint his head.

Judas Iscariot also seated at the table, sees Mary's action as neither a sign of respect for Jesus nor a declaration of his messiahship. He sees only waste, and rudely questions why the perfume wasn't sold for 300 denarii and the money given to the poor. Jesus, however, rises to Mary's defense, saying her act is "for the day of my burial." Anointing the dead was a common burial practice in that time, but Jesus, who seems to know what is coming, accepted this anointing as an act before the fact. As far as Jesus is concerned, Mary's gift is one of extravagant love, not of wasted perfume. (Homiletics online, 2010)

Mary's extravagant act was also an act of devotion. Even prior to experiencing Jesus' total sacrifice on the cross which has redeemed all of humankind, Mary serves as a model for Christian discipleship, showing us what sanctification truly looks like. In the person of Mary, Christian discipleship is an act of adoration of and gratitude to the one alone who is holy: Jesus, the Christ. The most telling characteristic of her gift is that Mary is silent through the whole thing drawing no attention to herself but directing all to the one she anoints.

Jesus' rebuke of Judas when he complains Mary is 'wasting' an entire year's worth of wages which could have been given to the poor is one that has puzzled me for decades. Taken literally, one could interpret that Jesus is suggesting we neglect the poor, and indeed I imagine there have been church leaders through the centuries who have used this verse to justify withholding alms for the poor. In my studies this past week, I finally gained a deeper understanding of Jesus' words. Jesus is not suggesting we ignore the poor, he is actually quoting Deuteronomy 15:11 whose message is unmistakable: "For the poor will never cease out of the land; therefore I

command you, you shall open wide your hand...to the needy and to the poor in the land. (RSV). Jesus is merely stating two facts – there will always be people in need, and I would say at Marquis we get this. We are continually surrounded by the poor. The second fact – Jesus points out that He will **NOT** always be with humankind in the flesh. Jesus is telling his followers the fate he must suffer. We know he is always present with us, we just cannot, much as we might like, reach out and touch him.

Today's passage serves as a prelude to the Passion. Jesus is quite clear, particularly in the Gospel of John that he **IS** going to Jerusalem, the city that kills prophets, and abuses messengers of God! Mary's act comes in the midst of a world of treachery and betrayal in the world, sadly even among Jesus' followers. What does this mean for you and me? It means we live our lives in the shadow of the cross, but as I said earlier, we also live in the presence of the risen Christ. In a little while we will share in companionship with Jesus at the Lord's Table; a time of blessing and grace, making it not only possible but inevitable for us to be as extravagant as Mary was with gifts of compassion and generosity. You and I are called to do this. We are called to live this way in a world that lives by a mind-set of tight-fistedness rather than a mind-set of abundance, tempting us to look inward and give little. We are called to live like this in a world whose violence and cruelty crucify people every day. (Shoemaker, *Feasting on the Word*, year C, volume 2, page 145.)

In closing listen to the words of Gloria Gaither and Bill George telling this familiar story of the Bible and performed by Steve Green.

Broken and Spilled Out

One day a plain village woman
Driven by love for her Lord
Recklessly poured out a valuable essence
Disregarding the scorn

And once it was broken and spilled out
A fragrance filled all the room
Like a prisoner released from his shackles
Like a spirit set free from the tomb

Broken and spilled out
Just for love of You, Jesus
My most precious treasure
Lavished on thee

Broken and spilled out
And poured at Your feet
In sweet abandon, let me be spilled out
And used up for Thee

Lord, You were God's precious treasure
His loved and His own perfect Son
Sent here to show me the love of the Father
Just for love it was done

And though You were perfect and holy
You gave up Yourself willingly
You spared no expense for my pardon
You were used up and wasted for me

Broken and spilled out
Just for love of me, Jesus
God's most precious treasure
Lavished on me

Broken and spilled out
And poured at my feet, in sweet abandon
Lord, You were spilled out
And used up for me