

"Gracious Ministries"
(John 12:1-8)
Apr 3, 2022

Last week, we mentioned that Jesus told three parables to convince the people that it's worth it to care for minorities. First, Jesus wouldn't be confused that a naughty sheep is different from the ninety-nine obedient ones. Second, a day's wage is not the same as the wages of the nine days. & Finally, an abuser of grace is incomparable to the one who was honest and faithful. However, we must also notice that having the lost sheep, the lost silver coin, and the prodigal son found were joyful events from the perspective of the kingdom of God. Jesus didn't appreciate decision-making processes based solely on profit and loss. Of course, it's joyous to earn and gain something, not ours before. But it could be even more joyful when we find the restored, a lost sheep, a lost silver coin, and a lost soul. If we find it hard to associate with what Jesus meant, imagine that they were the passion, energy, and health we once had, when we were young or younger. Do you miss them? Do you find it exciting if we could recover a tiny portion back?

We understand why some tend to hold on to the status quo or give it up altogether. It's natural to adopt such a perspective, especially when one sees things at the top of a hill or when one goes downhill. It's realistic, and it isn't optimistic at all. One would easily perceive that it's unfair and dangerous to the ninety-nine sheep when a shepherd starts a mission just for one rascal. One silver coin was equivalent to one day's wage back then. How can it be compared to the nine still in the pocket? The prodigal son and the prodigal father were not role models since they were both wrong. If there's a teaching

in these parables, it's that it is simply impractical. It's incompatible with what we encounter in our daily lives.

Judas was against what Mary had done to Jesus. "(Judas) said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it." Although this comment was a personal opinion about Judas added by the author, Judas's statement against Mary made sense. Why did she waste the money? Whether Judas said that for the poor or himself, the value of the perfume was a fact. There were different ways to use it. Why did she waste her time? Maybe Judas had made up his mind to betray Jesus already. The application of the perfume on Jesus wouldn't prolong his life.

It's easier for the apostles of Jesus to adopt the perspectives of Judas and the ones who had a hard time understanding Jesus' parables. They all related to the justification of how to spend their money and energy. Jesus's examples sound good to the unfortunate and vulnerable, but is it worth it to follow? They might all finally turn out to be unhelpful. Work for nothing? Yes, we must admit that it's tough to understand. Is it more practical to find a home for children living in this area than in other regions or countries, more meaningful to care for those still alive than those on unmarked burial sites? The pandemic of COVID-19 has given a lesson, though. If those who live far away from us are not okay, we are not. If location becomes an unquestionable boundary for different treatment, and time stops the pursuit of fairness and justice, this world would become more and more like a cultural desert, materialistic and pragmatic. The good news of the kingdom of God, however, proclaims that we all are the creative artworks of God. It provides reasons for

all humans, particularly faith seekers, to consider extending their care and concerns to the marginalized, racialized, and even criminalized.

As the provider of God's grace, Jesus announced, "The Spirit of the Lord ... has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor ... freedom for the prisoner, recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4: 18-19) We incorporated this as our mission when we became Christians. We didn't feel it as a burden when we were young, strong, full of opportunity and ambition. We didn't even care if we were the providers or the receivers of God's grace, even though we were both, like Jesus.

In today's passage, Mary ministered to Jesus very unusually. She took a costly perfume, anointed Jesus' feet, and then wiped them with her hair, an action that must have invited criticisms from all directions. The gospel writer has reported Judas' criticism from a financial and ethical perspective. It was too costly, and she could have helped the poor instead of doing this. But what about the custom that no respectable woman in Palestine would ever appear in public with her hair unbound? In addition, she wiped Jesus' feet with her hair openly in front of all the guests. It's unthinkable how a reputable woman would do such a thing, even though Jesus brought her brother back to life. As a receiver of Mary's gracious ministry, Jesus not only accepted it but also said, "Leave her alone." He defended her for doing something meaningful to a dead person like him. It seems that he knew his destiny, but nobody else did. Everyone will die but not necessarily be remembered. And what Mary did became meaningful not only to Jesus but also to Mary and all the guests since

all could smell already the fragrance of the perfume that filled the whole house.

I wonder if the apostles of Jesus had learned anything from this incident. It took place six days before the Passover. I raise this question because Jesus did something unusual like Mary, at the last supper, only a few days after this incident. Jesus got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, wrapped a towel around his waist, poured water into a basin, and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. (John 13:2-6) Peter's response to that was crystal clear, "No, you shall never wash my feet." (John 13: 8) The apostles saw how Jesus helped the people around him, the leper, the sick people, the possessed, the humiliated, and the underprivileged, without wearing a mask. They always saw their mission from a provider's perspective, occupying the moral high ground. What Jesus did now, however, turned everything upside down, putting them all into the receiving end of the ministry, just like how Mary ministered to Jesus. And don't forget Martha, who served all of them. Jesus' response to Mary's action was his "yes", while Peter's response to Jesus was "no." Peter finally repented, though not until Jesus said, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." (John 13:8)

Jesus played in his ministry the roles both of the giver and the receiver. His appreciation of the receiver's position is an invitation and an inspiration to all of us to re-imagine our mission as Church and our ministries?

There are different ways of seeing the Church. It could be seen as an institution that needs to carefully maneuver through agreements with other institutions and legal matters in a specified time and space. It could be

described as mystical communion, a community that is not limited by time and space, including the faithful before us, among us, and after us. It could also function as a sacrament, a symbol, a pointer toward God. Or we can identify Church as a herald that has a message to proclaim. Last but not least, we can perceive the Church as a servant, which allows us to see how its ministries can function without framing itself as the sole provider.

Jesus ministered to Mary's family by raising her brother Lazarus from death, and he appreciated and treasured what Mary ministered to him. "Leave her alone" is strong support. Don't criticize her. She has done something only the one who received it could understand. Are we giving out too much, or are we giving up too soon? We all wear different hats at different times. It's time to take off the giver's hat for a moment and put on the receiver's. Review what we have received, rethink what God's grace might be, and reconsider our roles in the future. May God bless us all through the Church's gracious ministries. Amen.