

SOMETHING MORE

What is the most valuable possession a person can own? A diamond ring or some other piece of fine jewelry? A luxury car with a built in GPS, satellite radio, surround sound speakers and all kinds of other bells and whistles? A house that overlooks the ocean?

And what's the most valuable possession you own? Think about it. Identify it. Picture it in your mind.

Now, imagine giving it away for Jesus.

That's what Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, did. She had this very expensive perfume. Just how expensive was it? It was worth a year's wages. Now, we might quibble about how much money a year's wage is because some people make a lot more money annually than others do. But I tell you what. Even if a person is working a minimum wage job slinging hamburgers at a fast food restaurant or bagging groceries at a supermarket, the money he or she earns in a year is still a very significant amount—if not to us, it is to them. So, hopefully we can agree that what Mary did was pretty incredible, giving up that valuable pint of nard, representing 365 days of hard labor for the average worker in the town of Bethany.

In fact, what Mary did was so incredible that if anyone here pledged a year's wages to our church in our recent stewardship campaign, I will become your personal slave for life. We'll see if there are any winners. I'm sure that someone on the Ministry of Outreach and Stewardship will let me know who the lucky person is when all the pledges we've received have been tallied.

Mary's amazing act of generosity occurred at a dinner to honor Jesus. This dinner was thrown because Jesus had recently done something pretty amazing himself. He had raised Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, from the dead, after Lazarus had spent four days in his grave. The amount of time is significant, because when someone has been dead for four days the corpse begins to decay, and the stink of death starts to fill the air. And the deceased person's soul, which Jews back then believed hung around the tomb until the decomposition process made it impossible to recognize the body, makes a final and permanent separation and returns to God.

But here was Lazarus—Mr. “Dead as a Doornail” himself—reclining at

the table with Jesus and his sisters, breaking bread with them. So there was a lot to celebrate, and good reason to make Jesus an honorary guest in their home.

Imagine yourself reclining around that table alongside Jesus, Martha and Mary and Lazarus, and Jesus' disciples. Imagine the awe and wonder of the people there. Think about the gladness and gratitude that must have radiated from their faces. Picture Mary thinking to herself, "This is so wonderful. My brother Lazarus, whom we thought we had lost until the resurrection at the last day, is alive and well. My Lord who raised him from the dead is here in our home, under our roof, receiving our hospitality. He has brought so much joy to this house."

Then Mary begins to have doubts. She wonders, "I hope Jesus is enjoying the meal. We want so much to honor him. We want to express our deep love and gratitude to him for what he has done for us. Somehow, a dinner just doesn't seem like enough. There must be something more I can do for the Lord who has done so much for me and my family. But what else can I do?"

And that's when Mary remembered the pint of pure nard, the precious perfume she had hidden away in a secure place somewhere in the house where thieves couldn't find it because it was the most valuable possession she owned. It would be like us having a bottle of incredibly expensive wine stored down in the wine cellar, and we're waiting for just the right moment, the ideal occasion, to bring it up and break it open.

Maybe Mary hesitated to go get the nard. "No," she may have thought. "I can't give up that. It's too precious, too costly. It took me years to save up enough to be able to buy it. But then that thought rolled through her mind again. "There must be something more I can do for the Lord who has done so much for me. But what else can I do?"

In my mind's eye I see Mary laying down her fork, looking over at Jesus and offering him a smile, then standing up suddenly and leaving the table. As everyone stares at her and wonders what's up with her, she says, "Excuse me for a minute. There's something I need to get." Something more.

Perhaps that could be the starting point of every act of giving we make to Christ, who has done so much for us. Maybe that's what we who want to financially support our church could ponder and reflect on for a time as we pull out our offering envelopes and get ready to place them in the offering plate, as we will be doing in a few minutes. Is there something more I can do for the Lord who has done so much for me? What else can I do?

Mary's great and valuable gift of perfume and anointing Jesus' body was her way of revering Jesus and expressing her thanks and joyfulness for all that

Jesus had done for her and her family. Her act was intended to honor Jesus' life. Little did she know—until Jesus made the announcement at the dinner table—that she was actually honoring and preparing for Jesus' death. A death that was to be the capstone, the ultimate and final act of giving from the Lord who had already done so much for her. And who has done so much for us, and for the world.

Every Sunday after we give our offertory gifts, we sing the Doxology. The lyrics are so familiar that many of us sing them without even thinking, without really pondering their meaning and significance.

“Praise God from whom all blessings flow.

“Praise him all creatures here below.

“Praise him above ye heavenly host.

“Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.”

The significance of singing the Doxology immediately after we give our offerings to God is the realization that praising God and giving go hand in hand. We praise God when we give. And we give to praise God. That's what Mary was doing in this morning's reading from John's Gospel. When she pulled out her precious, expensive perfume, poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair, she was praising the God from whom all blessings flow.

She was praising: the God of bounty and abundance who gave her the valuable nard in the first place. The God of resurrection and life, who raised her beloved brother Lazarus from the dead. The God of love who revealed Himself to her so clearly and unmistakably in the person of Jesus. At some point while Mary reclined at that table with her Lord and her family, her heart bursting with thanksgiving and gladness, she felt moved to express herself in a powerful, dramatic, definitive way—in a way she had never done before.

Maybe it was while she was breaking the bread, or sipping from the wine cup, or taking a bite of the grilled fish her sister Martha had prepared that Mary found herself thinking, “There must be something more I can do for the Lord who has done so much for me. But what else can I do?” And what she did; what that “something more” she could do was, and the only thing she felt she really could do at that moment, was to give.

And that's what Mary did. She gave. Generously. Gratefully. Cheerfully. And through her act of giving she honored Jesus, helped ready him for his death on the cross, and praised God. All at once. And every time we give—give of our time, our energy and talents, or our money—we get to do the same. We get to share our blessings. We get to honor Christ. We get to praise God. We get to think about what we can do for the Lord, and answer for ourselves the question

that should be behind all of our giving.

“Is there something more I can do to praise and honor God from whom all blessings flow? Is there something more I can do to show my love for Christ, who gave everything, including his very life, for me and for the world, in the greatest act of sacrificial love he could possibly make? Is there something more you and I can do?”

The response to that question will be different and unique for everyone here, and is for us to discover in our own individual way. As we continue our Lenten journey, I pray that we will find the answer God has in mind. Amen.