

Teach Us to Number Our Days: Six Days Before

A sermon by Jim Somerville, Pastor, First Baptist Church, Richmond, Va.

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

John 12:1-8

Today we conclude a Lenten sermon series called “Teach us to number our days,” based on a line from Psalm 90 where Moses says, “The days of our years are threescore years and ten, and if by reason of strength they be fourscore, yet is their strength labor and sorrow; it is soon cut off, and we fly away.” In other words, we might live to be seventy years old, or even eighty if we’re strong, but we are not going to live forever, not in this world. Therefore, “Teach us to number our days,” Moses says, “so that we might get a heart of wisdom.” That is, since we’re not going to live forever, Lord, teach us how to live wisely and well, and how to make every day count.” For the last several weeks that is what the Lord Jesus himself has been teaching us: 1) how to resist temptation by being very clear about who we are and why we’re here; 2) how to overcome fear by thinking of others more than we think of ourselves and always putting them first; 3) how to be ready for whatever comes next by living lives that are fruitful and full; 4) how to live by the story God tells about us rather than the story we might tell about ourselves; 5) and this week I think Jesus wants to teach us a lesson about what we should value in life.

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, “Why was this perfume

not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” (He 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.) Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me” (NRSV).

Last week I talked with a young couple who will be getting married soon about the four things that can cause problems in a marriage: money, sex, religion, and in-laws. I started with money, because it really is the number one thing and there’s a reason for that: money is a symbol of what we value. I said, “A twenty dollar bill is just a piece of paper, but you can exchange it for something you think is worth twenty dollars, like two tickets to the latest movie. But let’s say you’re a golfer, and you go out and spend \$300 on a new golf club—a driver. Your lovely bride may not appreciate the fact that it has “an elongated head design that combines with an external weight pad to position the center of gravity for higher launching and longer carry drives.” She may not care that it is “engineered with Straight Flight Technology which promotes natural club head rotation by concentrating approximately 10% of the head mass towards the heel.”^[i] She may think that \$300 could have been spent on something more valuable—like groceries—and she may say so, out loud. That’s how the trouble begins.”

Now, go back about two thousand years, to a dinner party in the little town of Bethany, just outside Jerusalem, where you confront a very similar situation. According to the custom of the time Jesus and his disciples were reclining, stretched out on cushions placed around a low, central table, each of them propped up on their elbows, talking, laughing, their faces lit up by oil lamps, reaching for the food with one hand while their feet were back there somewhere, in the shadowy recesses of the room. Lazarus, who had recently been raised from the dead, was there at the table with them. Martha was serving. And Mary slipped into the room not with a new golf club but with a big bottle of expensive perfume. While everyone was still talking and eating she began to pour it out on Jesus’ feet, wiping them with her hair, until the whole house was filled with the fragrance. That may have been when Judas looked around, saw what she was

doing, and asked, “Why wasn’t this perfume sold for 300 denarii and the money given to the poor?”

Now, John is quick to tell us that he didn’t say this because he cared about the poor, but ‘because he was a thief’ and used to steal money right out of the common purse. Still, he raises the question of value. This perfume was worth 300 denarii, he argues—almost a year’s salary (and leave it up to Judas to know the street value of a pound of pure nard). If Mary didn’t want it, if she was just going to pour it out, why not sell it and use the proceeds for some better purpose?

It’s like the wife arguing that 300 dollars might have been better spent on groceries than golf clubs. But Jesus says: “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.” Let that last word hang in the air for a moment. “You always have the poor with you but you do not always have me.” Because this is not really a statement about the poor, although some people have used it that way; it’s a statement about Jesus and about his relative value.

As far as Mary is concerned Jesus is worth everything she has to give. If she had a hundred bottles of perfume she would fill a bathtub and let Jesus soak in it. If she had a million bottles she would fill a swimming pool and let him do laps. There is nothing more valuable to her than he is and this is her way of showing it. But to Judas Jesus is not worth that much. As we learn from the other Gospels he is worth only thirty pieces of silver. And so, he argues, “Why not sell the perfume and do something better with the money?” But that word, better, is a relative term; it depends on who you are and what you value, doesn’t it? Is spending money on a new driver better than spending it on groceries? Depends. If you are the husband in my story, probably so; if you are the wife, probably not. Is pouring out perfume on Jesus better than giving the money to the poor? Depends. If you are Mary in this story it is; but if you are Judas in this story it is not.

I was thinking about today’s dedication service, and about how having a baby can radically alter your understanding of value. I think I’ve shared this story with you before but two days after my first child was born I drove to the hospital to pay the

bill. I had checked the balance on my account, shifted some funds from savings to checking, and swallowed hard at the thought of writing the biggest personal check of my life. Still, I was stubbornly cheerful. I was going to bring my new daughter home, after all, and in some ways that check would be like paying for her. And in so many ways she was worth whatever it might cost. I had held her in my arms. I had fallen in love with her face. She had curled her hand around my little finger and wrapped my heart around hers. So when the woman behind the counter told me what I owed I wrote the check with a smile, ripped it out of the book and told her, as I handed it over, "A bargain!"

"Where your treasure is," says Jesus, "there your heart will be, also" (Matthew 6:21), and if you had looked at that check you would have seen that he was right: there, on the right hand side, in a little box, was a four-digit figure that represented most of my earthly treasure, and there, on the left hand side, in the memo blank, was the name of the one who had captured most of my heart: "Ellie," it said. "This money is for Ellie." If you had kept up with our spending in the weeks and months that followed you would have seen that Christy's heart, and not only mine, had gone out to our new baby, because that's where our treasure was going in large, recklessly spent sums. To Target for a crib mattress. To Wal-Mart for diapers. To Revco for vitamins. Whatever Ellie needed, Ellie got: she was our baby! And any one of you who has brought home a baby knows how easy it is to go through money in those days and how happy you are to do it. You don't complain about it. You don't say, "Well, here we go again, spending more money on the blankety-blank baby!" No. You write the checks and hand them over with a silly grin on your face. "A bargain," you say. "It's for the baby."

That's how Mary was about Jesus. 300 denarii worth of perfume was nothing compared to her love for him, and in our epistle reading for today we see that Paul felt the same way. "I had it all," he says. "As far as religious pedigree goes, nobody had more to brag about. I was circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard

as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.” Do you hear that? Everything Paul had worked for, all his accomplishments and achievements, were like a big, stinking pile of garbage—or worse!—compared to the value of knowing Christ.

And you probably knew it was going to come down to this, but I need to ask you anyway: what is Christ worth to you? What kind of value do you put on him? I picture Mary pouring out that perfume on Jesus’ feet and I can almost see her face. She is lost in wonder, love, and praise. She isn’t counting the cost. I hear the rapture in Paul’s voice as he talks about the surpassing value of knowing Christ, how it is worth everything he has ever achieved, everything he has ever accomplished. I don’t often hear that kind of talk from church people, even strong, committed Christians. When you talk to the most dedicated of the bunch they sometimes talk about tithing, about giving ten percent of their income back to God through the church, and how it’s a sign of their devotion. It’s a good thing, and as pastor of a church that depends on precisely that kind of generosity I’m grateful, but I think Mary would have been appalled at the idea of giving only ten percent to Jesus. It would be like asking her to draw only ten percent of her next breath, or letting her heart beat only ten percent of the time. Jesus was her life, and she gave what she had for him gladly just as she knew he would give what he had for her.

And Paul! Can you imagine Paul coming to church on Sunday, teaching a Sunday school class, sitting in a pew for worship, and then going back to his regular job on Monday morning? He couldn’t have a regular job. He’d tried that before, and decided to give it all up for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ his Lord. He had become a full-time itinerant evangelist, without any promise of a paycheck, going from place to place mending tents as a way of keeping a little bread in his bag but mostly living off the joy he got from sharing the good news. In 2 Corinthians 11 he says, “Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three

times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked.” And yet you can almost hear him saying, “But who cares about any of that! I get to share the good news about Jesus and that is the most important thing.”

So, here’s the question: What is the most important thing in your life? Is it your family? Your career? Is it money, or status? It’s an important question to ask when you’re trying to number your days so that you can get a heart of wisdom; when you realize that you won’t live forever, not in this world; when you want to live wisely and well and make every day count. When I talked to that young couple last week about money I told them that someday I want someone to write on my tombstone, “Here lies a grateful and generous man.” They came back to that later in the conversation, the idea that someday there might be a tombstone with their names on it, and that it would matter what was written on it. You could tell they were thinking about what they wanted to do with their lives as well as their money, and what kind of legacy they wanted to leave behind.

I think about Mary. Matthew and Mark tell this story differently than John does. They don’t mention her by name. And yet, at the end of the story they say, “Wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world what this woman has done will be told in memory of her” (Matthew 26:13; Mark 14:9). She left a legacy.

And Paul? What do you get for putting Jesus first in your life, for considering everything else rubbish compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ the Lord? I can’t promise this for everyone but Paul gets mentioned in church almost every Sunday, nearly everywhere in the world, and usually in a good way. He left a legacy.

So, now I’m thinking that maybe it’s not enough for me to have on my tombstone “Here lies a grateful and generous man.” Maybe it’s more important to say,

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“Here lies a man who before his days on earth ran out, discovered what matters most—that is—who matters most, and tried to live for him.”

[\[i\]](#) Full disclosure: I got this language from an ad for a new Ping driver, selling for \$299. I know almost nothing about golf or about golf club engineering.