

Text: [John 12:1-8 \(CEB\)](#)
Date: February 22, 2026 – First Sunday in Lent
Title: “An Unlikely Offering” – An Unlikely Lent Series, week 1
Theme: What we do in faith, we should do boldly, without worry about what detractors might say.

1

There’s a story I read this week about a woman named Ann Robinson Smith, who lived in Charlotte, North Carolina. Back in the late 80s, she had the vision to take surplus food from restaurants in order to help feed hungry people in her city. She founded an organization called North Carolina Harvest.

Over the years, North Carolina Harvest has delivered hundreds of tons of food to shelters that otherwise would have been thrown away.

Not unlike the ministry a group of folks here took up to divert food from area Wawas to the Christian Caring Center.

There’s a story from the early days of Ann Smith’s work, when she was going to solicit donations at Bank of America, which is headquartered there in Charlotte.

On her way to the meeting, she stopped and picked up a load of donuts that were otherwise headed to the landfill to bring to area soup kitchens.

And it wasn’t a couple dozen, but a whole carload of donuts. So when she got on the elevator to go up to where the executive offices were, someone commented:

“You smell amazing – just like donuts!”

Which opened up a conversation about her work and what she was doing.

And just like that, she was able to convert someone to her cause. All because she smelled like donuts¹.

And it happened multiple times on her way up the elevator.

2

When I read this story, I wonder what it must have smelled like in
the house where Mary poured out a pound of perfume on
Jesus' feet

I mean, Kate and I went to the gym the other day and there was a
young man walking in just ahead of us

And it was clear he hit the body spray hard before he went to the
gym – I guess maybe he anticipated getting really sweaty

Anyway, it was a lot

Our sensitivity to smells is pretty amazing

Whoever put ashes on my head the other day used scented oil in
the ashes

And it took me a few minutes to figure it out – because when I
moved in certain ways I would get just the slightest whiff of it

It was a really beautiful thing that followed me all through the day

I can't help but think about how Jesus might have smelled after
today's story

I imagine that all through the week leading up to his arrest,
because in John's gospel, there's only about a week between this
event and Good Friday –

People caught the scent of this perfume everywhere Jesus went
His clothes probably still smelled of it as he stood trial

Still smelled of it as his captors took his tunic and cast lots for it

I wonder what effect the scent of Mary's sacrifice had on those
who experienced it?

3

I've always been fascinated by Mary and Martha and Lazarus

These three were clearly in Jesus' inner circle

I always think of them as Jesus' rich, connected friends who lived in the suburbs outside Jerusalem

Bethany is just over the Mount of Olives from the Temple, less than 2 miles in those times

I say this family was connected because John tells us "many" had come from Jerusalem to comfort Lazarus' family after his death

I say they were rich because not too many people would have had a pound of spikenard laying around

Spikenard grows in the foothills of the Himalayas, at elevations between 9 & 16,000 feet – so you can only imagine what it might have cost to import that to Israel in those times²

John says that this perfume was worth almost a year's wages – tens of thousands of dollars

We don't know why she had the perfume, exactly – one commentary I read suggested this might have been intended for her dowry

The money she was expected to carry into marriage one day
And yet, here she was – looking for all the world like she was throwing it away in a "meaningless" gesture

At least according to people like Judas, who was there to see it

He wants *everyone* to know how many poor people could have been helped with this offering

Which is always the debate in the church, right up to this day

Do we spend the money on some beautiful stained glass –
adornment for a space where we *talk* about serving people?

– or do we just forgo the stained glass and actually *serve* people

That is, by giving the money away

No easy answer to that one

I love that every gospel tells the story of Jesus' anointing
There aren't a ton of stories Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all
have in common, but this is one of them
This is the only time, however, that the woman doing the
anointing is named

It's the fulfillment of Matthew 26:13, where Jesus silences the
critics of her sacrifice by saying –
"Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached, what she has
done will be told, in memory of her."
Clearly what happened here mattered to Jesus, that he wanted it
to be included in HIS story

4

Judas, much as we might hate to admit it
Prompts a discussion that's still important to the church about the
best use of resources
I'm wrestling with this a little bit now with respect to the digital sign
out by the road
A new one is on the order of \$25-30,000 – that's why it remains
dark for the moment
Is that the highest priority?

In this passage, we have that famous verse, where Jesus says,
"you will always have the poor among you"
Throughout history, that line has sometimes been misused by
Christians to evade our responsibility to the poor
"Well, Jesus said there would always be poor, so..."

But Jesus is quoting a verse from Deuteronomy chapter 15:
“Poor persons will never disappear from the earth. That’s why I’m giving you this command: you must open your hand generously to your fellow Israelites, to the needy among you, and to the poor who live with you in your land.” (15:11, CEB)
The fact that there will always be people in need isn’t meant to say, “give up helping, you can’t do anything about it”
It’s to say, “this is why we must live generously – all the time”

The thing, however, that Judas misses in his critique is that it’s
MARY’S OFFERING – and not his
And so it’s HER decision about how she wants to use her gifts to serve Jesus
The other gospels talk about how Jesus perceived she was
“anointing his body for burial”

Mary, Martha and Lazarus – being as well-connected as they were

May very well have known of the plot against Jesus
John’s gospel says that after Lazarus was raised from the dead, high officials made the decision that Jesus needed to go
Jesus was ultimately killed for bringing others life

So Mary offered him a funeral before a funeral
An act of devotion from someone who frequently sat at Jesus’ feet like all the male disciples
And in the same way I’m sure that Judas wanted to criticize her for the expense
She was probably criticized throughout for boldly taking her place at Jesus’ feet
I mean, the gospels share a story where her own sister is angry with her for it (Luke 10:38-42)

5

The power of Mary's witness is that she made the choices, in
faith, that seemed best to her
Regardless of criticism
And she was bold in doing it
Whether that was sitting at Jesus' feet
or pouring out \$50,000 worth of perfume

Her faith led her to do the things, to make the sacrifices, that
caused others to tell her story, right up to this day

In Charlotte, one woman's willingness to walk around smelling like
donuts
Kept thousands from going hungry

Every day presents us with opportunities
To make choices that reflect our faith and devotion to Jesus

Sometimes, people will wonder why
It may seem like a waste – of time, of money, of energy

I mean, why do we do anything we do in the church?
Something like playing in a praise band -
Or singing in a choir?
You spend all this time in effort and preparation, learning a piece
and rehearsing it, until it's just right
And then it's over, and only the memory of it remains

But later in the day, or later in the week, you find it comes back to
you
Perhaps in a moment where it's really needed

Not unlike me on Ash Wednesday
Going through my day, and being reminded of the ashes on my
forehead by the scent of the oil
And thinking of Jesus' sacrifice

Jesus went to trial, he was condemned to death
With the aroma of Mary's sacrifice still clinging to his tunic
A bold witness to life in the midst of death

Don't ever let anyone tell you that your sacrifice
That your effort, that your energy is wasted
What the Spirit leads you to do in faith, do boldly

Don't apologize
Or allow others' cynicism to dissuade or discourage you
It's not a bad thing to go through life smelling like donuts!

Amen.

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¹ <https://firstpresconcord.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/John-12.1-8.pdf#:~:text=Anne%20Smith%20who%20founded%20the,Bank%20of%20America%20tower%20in>
You can also read her obituary here: <https://www.altogetherfuneral.com/obituaries/AnnSmith67724>

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nardostachys>