

Reframed

We're nearing the end of our "Reframed" Lenten series. If you've tracked along with us, are you starting to see your life's picture in a new way? If you're just joining us for the first time, we started five weeks ago by finding a "Panoramic Perspective" through Scripture in Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. We were then invited to "Get in the Picture" as we embraced belonging.

After that, we were offered a "Retake," just like the fig tree who was given another season. And then we focused on "Perfecting Our Selfie" as we examined our own focus through the lens of the parable of the prodigal son. That brings us to today. This morning, we're going to think about how so often we are "NOT Picture Perfect." Specifically, we're going to talk about a God who loves us perfectly in our imperfection. If you have a Bible or a Bible app handy, turn with me to John 12:1-8. I'm reading from the New International Version this morning. **Read John 12:1-8.**

A few weeks back, I told you about this beautifully carved picture frame at Mom and Dad's place – which held a not so pretty portrait of Grandmother Strauss as long as Grandma Berryman was alive. After she died, a family portrait of Grandma, Mom, Dad, and us kids was stuck into the frame and hung on the wall for probably the next ten years or so. That family portrait would have been taken around 1992, when Olan Mills came to the church, and all the families signed up to get their pictures taken.

Perfect Pictures

Remember Olan Mills? They came here to New Hope back around 2013 or 2014, I think – whenever the last time was that we did a church directory. In those pictures, everyone looked great, right? As you're sitting there to get the photo taken, the person behind the camera tells you things like, "tilt your head to the right," "lift your chin up just a bit," and on and on – to get the perfect picture.

And then, they tell you, "Say 'cheese!'" and boom! The picture's snapped! Next, they have you go over and sit at another table to wait for a friendly salesperson to come along to get you to spend the next hour showing you all the "package" options. I hated those as a kid. It was boring! I'm still not fond of those kinds of photo-shoots, because the next thing you know, you've laid down \$200 or \$300, and you've lost three hours of your life that you'll never get back.

It's probably time for us as a church family to think about doing a photo directory. I think, and maybe you might agree, there's a time and place for all that fancy stuff, on a wall of a living room somewhere. The professional photographers take some amazing pictures. And, sometimes those pictures can become treasured decorations.

But I want you think about most of the pictures you have around your house. I bet if you go home today and look, you'll find pictures that a family member took with their own camera – or their phone – and that's probably true the majority of the photos you have around your place.

Not Picture Perfect

Those professional photos do not always capture the reality of the moment. While they may turn out nice, they can sometimes pale in comparison to the spontaneous snapshots we take ourselves during life's most meaningful moments. Some of the best photos we'll ever take are far from "picture perfect," but they can immortalize a moment that we'll celebrate forever. Or maybe, your place is like our place, and rather than actual photos, you have drawings of stick people, or people made out of triangles drawn with markers. Alison's been drawing and hanging "pictures" on the refrigerator – or taping them up on the walls – with little messages, like "Mom and Dad love each other," or "The sisters."

The pictures we take – or draw – aren't picture perfect. They're usually spontaneous, intimate, genuine life experiences. Which brings us to the Gospel lesson this morning. John records a spontaneous, intimate, genuine, and beautiful moment between Jesus and Mary.

He states, "Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with Him," (John 12:1-2). This event is happening about a week before Jesus was crucified. Lazarus had died, and was laid in the tomb for four days – and Jesus had just raised him back to life back in Chapter 11. After raising her brother from the dead, it's a sure thing that Mary wanted to bring an offering of gratitude to lay at the feet of Jesus.

Saying "Thank You"

Typically, we might just bring cash or coins, right? Just throw it in the offering at Church. Maybe someone would offer to make a meal – that's what Martha, Lazarus' other sister, does. Or maybe we would write a nice "Thank You" card, like we talked about earlier with the kids. But how would you thank someone responsible for saving the life of your brother? And not just saving his life – but actually raising him back to life after he had been dead for four days?

Another thing to keep in mind here, is the role of women in society in those days. With Lazarus dead, any old guy can come along and lay claim to the sisters' home. To their property. It was a man's world, and usually women didn't inherit property from their parents, or their husbands. That's why over and over in the Old Testament, we

see these various women wanting so badly to have sons – so they'll be secured financially in their old age.

To put it another way, Martha and Mary lived in their brother Lazarus' house. Mary shows Jesus some really radical hospitality. "Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume," (verse 3). Don't miss all the details here, friends. Jesus is "reclining" at the table. In those days, people laid on low couches with their head, arms, and elbows on the table, while their feet stretched away from it. So here's Mary, taking what may very well be the most expensive perfume in the land, and pouring the whole jar over Jesus' feet while He's reclining at the table.

Gratitude that's Uncomfortably Scandalous

Imagine the aroma of the perfume, which "filled the entire house," we're told, but it would also linger there for weeks. Normally just a pinch of perfume lasted all day – and she's dumped roughly a pint – 16 ounces, on Jesus' feet. If that's not bad enough, notice what else she did. She dried up the perfume by wiping her hair all over the feet of Jesus. She's practically laying on the floor, wiping His feet. Can you imagine how uncomfortably scandalous that would make us feel – to see a woman do something like this to a man?

It's highly inappropriate – and it was in that culture, especially. If you go back to Ruth, read how Ruth is told to approach Boaz when she wants him to be her kinsman-redeemer by marrying her. It's very similar. Ruth is told to lay at Boaz' feet. Some people over the years – and you may have heard something about this before – have suggested that Jesus and Mary were a couple or something to that effect. They base it mostly on this verse – but when they do, they miss the main punchline, which comes next – about Judas.

See, Judas sees Mary do this, and what's he do? He complains about it. "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages," (verse 5). John constantly cues us into the true motives of Judas Iscariot.

Nearly every mention of Judas throughout John's gospel includes his own commentary. In this case, he seems to contrast the grateful heart of Mary with the scheming intentions of Judas. John writes, "He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it," (verse 6). In many ways, the contrast between Mary and Judas also helps cue us into what God desires – authentic, wholehearted, inner devotion as opposed to the easily measurable, scalable, and controllable metric of following rules and principles. After all, people can follow all the commandments, but if their hearts are misplaced, what's the point?

Perfectly Loved in our Imperfections

That's what the Pharisees did. That's why Jesus called them out over and over. They followed the Ten Commandments – but their hearts were cold towards people. Jesus had to straighten out old Judas, too. "Leave her alone," He said. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of My burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have Me," (verses 7-8).

The staged, scripted, Olan Mills photo hanging on the living room wall has the appearance of one big, happy family, even when its appearance doesn't match reality. We were all smiles in that family photograph with Grandma Berryman, but growing up, Annie, Ben, and I fought like cats and dogs! Those unscripted, spontaneous, blurry, amateur photos you find around the house, though, those are real. They have experiences, holidays, events behind them. And that's where the real beauty is.

The disciples could have sold the perfume and helped the poor. That would have been the "right" thing to do, regardless of Judas' slick, swindling intentions. Instead, Jesus honored the spontaneous, uncomfortable, mysterious, and imperfectly beautiful act of Mary's beautifully-vulnerable and generous gratitude. It was an intimate moment worthy of hanging on the refrigerator rather than framed, and put up on the living room wall. What would it look like for us today to embrace those God-filled moments that are messy and uncomfortable? What would it look like for us to celebrate and be comfortable being a part of a picture that is perfectly NOT Picture Perfect, yet knowing we're perfectly loved by God in our imperfection?

Prayer: Exalted One, whose presence is loving-kindness, receive our hearts and lives, as imperfect and human as they may be, and grant us a glimpse into the mystery of Your Kingdom, that we may know Your presence in our lives. Through Jesus Christ, Your Son and our Savior. Amen.