

“Extravagance”

Sermon for Community Holy Week Services
at Decatur First United Methodist Church, Georgia

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Holy Scriptures: John 12: 1-8

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.”

Sermon

Extravagance

Suddenly, unexpectedly, to everyone's surprise,

maybe even to her own surprise,

in an unplanned, compulsive act of generosity, of service,
of love,

Mary took a pound of costly, fragrant perfume

and poured it over Jesus' feet.

Conversation stopped.

Lazarus, Martha, Simon the Leper,

the disciples and followers and casual lookers on

ceased their dinnertime chit-chat to watch.

The fragrance of the costly perfume filled the room and filled their senses.

They would know the smell, the fragrance,

as it reached into their memory banks,

reconnecting them with memories from their pasts.

They watched as she took her beloved Jesus' feet in her hands

to rub them and clean them and anoint them with pure nard,

and then Mary unbound her hair, letting it fall around her.

She leaned over and,

using her hair as a towel, wiped his feet dry.

The room was still.

What had begun as a casual meal among friends became holy.

What started simple became sacred.

Between the sudden compulsion to serve,

the shock of a pound of costly perfume being opened,

the fragrance that filled their common space,

and Mary's act of devotion and love,

clearly this was an event, a happening,

something to remember and
share again and again.

Extravagance

Love of God had brought these people together in the home of Lazarus.

Yet this experience of love

took them all to a whole new place, a new dimension, a new
spirituality,

They observed an act of love like they had never seen before,

one so sacrificial, one so lavish,

so sensual, so devotional, so out of the ordinary

it brought powerful emotions to the forefront.

For some it brought tears to their eyes.

Some looked at the floor, or out the window.

Some smiled and returned Jesus' look of gratitude.

Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples, became upset.

Others may have felt similarly,

but as you know, history is written by winners and Judas is cast as the loser.

We tend to forget and overlook an inconvenient truth,

that when Jesus said in the Upper Room, *“One of you here will betray me,”*

everyone present said, *“Is it I, Lord?”*

We all have it in us to do incredible acts of mercy and love,

and we have the capacity to do evil, to betray Christ and one another.

“Is it I, Lord?”

We’ve all said it, we’ve done it, and hopefully we’ve confessed it,

so let’s not dump on Judas who spoke up and said what was on folks’ minds.

Judas watched as Mary anointed Jesus’ feet and wiped them with her hair,

and when he could not contain himself any longer

he said, *“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii*

and the money given to the poor?”

Jesus spoke up in defense of Mary’s extravagant act of worship.

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.”

Extravagance

Ah, the practical collides with the holy.

Here we have an act of worship, of thanksgiving and grace,

and invariably someone stands up and says, “I object!”

Is the communal concern here that 300 dinarii was “wasted” on Jesus?

Is Jesus worthy of an act of extreme extravagance?

Should he be shown the pleasure of human sensuality?

Should we condone an anointing as thanksgiving for the love that he has shown to us?

Or is this a control thing,

that all compulsive acts of grace must first

be brought to the proper committee for approval?

Is this objection out of a sense of true compassion for the poor in our midst?

When should precious resources be used for mission

and when should they be used for anointing?

When the pie seems so small and the need so great,

how do we slice what we have been given

to do the will of God in such a time as this?

So often we in the church must make tough choices between the sacred and the serving.

Extravagance

St. John the Divine in NYC is the largest Protestant cathedral on the Eastern seaboard.

St. John the Divine's steeples tower over the expanse of Manhattan's Upper West Side and Harlem communities.

Its construction was stopped for many years in the 1960s and 70s

when a new rector arrived

and announced that the church would not invest another penny

in construction so long as there were poor families in Harlem.

Having been one of those families in Harlem,

we understood his stance,

and don't think that the city did not notice

the untouched piles of stone meant for walls.

However, when the succeeding rector arrived

he wondered if there was a way to do both,
to serve the poor within reach of our hands and resources
as well as to complete a sacred space to give glory
to God
in an act of extravagant praise and awe
and gratitude?

And so the cathedral construction was begun, again,
and so the giving to charity increased a hundredfold, again.
And the church began a new outreach ministry,
one in which young men and young women from Harlem
learned the craft of stone masonry,
to build walls and rebuild lives,
to work with their hands at the feet of
Jesus,
bent over in toil and covered
with dust,
fragrant with the sweet
sweat of their labors.

Jesus and his followers looked on and smiled in deep gratitude and
thanksgiving,
and together church and city honed new skills

as they bowed low before God and built pillars to the sky.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!