

Extravagant Love
Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8
March 18, 2007

There certainly had been a roller coaster of emotions in Bethany recently. Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, was critically ill. His illness stirred the town, for he was loved by everyone. His sisters were so concerned that they sent for their good friend, Jesus, knowing that his healing power had turned many others back from the curse of illness. Jesus was slow in responding to their request, and in the meantime, Lazarus died. The village was filled with mourning. When Jesus arrived some could not help but share their anger at his delay. Even Martha greeted him by saying, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus himself expressed his deep sorrow by weeping for his friend. Then characteristically, he took charge of the situation. They went to the cave where Lazarus was laid. Jesus called, "Lazarus, come out." Lazarus rose from the dead.

There was great rejoicing in the village. Yet as the incident was reported to the religious leaders, a warrant was issued for Jesus' arrest. He quietly withdrew from the celebration and ceased speaking publicly. He knew that his ministry was coming to a conclusion.

Close to the Passover festival, Jesus returned to Bethany, for it was just miles from Jerusalem. He returned to the home of Lazarus. Martha served a dinner in Jesus' honor. It was a joyous reunion of friends and a celebration of the new life given to Lazarus. The home was filled with joy and gratitude. There was a pleasant atmosphere as they reclined at the table, sharing memories, stories, and hopes.

At one point Mary left the table and returned carrying a beautiful jar of perfume. She knelt at Jesus' place, where she lovingly poured the pound of perfume over his feet in an act of anointing. Anointing with oil was offered as a blessing on special occasions such as weddings and the consecration of priests. This was a bold and daring act on her behalf, for women were not allowed to touch men in public. The dinner guests were stunned as they watched Mary wipe Jesus' feet with her hair. All were entranced by this generous outpouring of gratitude. The fragrance of the expensive perfume filled the home, leaving the aroma of generosity and love. Days earlier the stench of death had hung over the home; now it was filled with the fragrance of life and friendship.

The aura of wonder and gratitude was harshly interrupted by Judas, who asked, "Why wasn't this expensive perfume sold? It's worth a year's salary; it could have fed a poor family for a year. That would have been a better use than this wasteful extravagance." Generosity is countered by greed. Gratitude is

overshadowed by critique. The joyous atmosphere is quickly burst like a balloon.

John notes that Judas wasn't really concerned for the poor. He was the disciples' treasurer. He kept the common purse and freely embezzled the funds. He could not tolerate the useless waste of a year's worth of income. It turned his stomach and made him disgusted. Even as one of the twelve insiders, Judas still had not gotten Jesus' message.

As Kathleen Norris reminds us:

Maybe monks and poets know, as Jesus did, when a friend, in an extravagant, loving gesture, bathed his feet in nard, an expensive fragrant oil, and wiped them with her hair, that the symbolic act matters; that those who know the exact price of things, as Judas did, often don't know the true cost or value of anything.¹

In contrast to Judas, Jesus recognizes the value of Mary's act. He admonishes Judas to let Mary alone. Her gift is preparation for Jesus' death, which was imminent.

The Gospel of John is a mystical gospel. The author invites us to see beyond the surface of events into their holy depths. Jesus sees that Mary's anointing is more than a gift of gratitude for Lazarus' resurrection. It is the symbolic anointing of his body with spices for his upcoming burial. This is a holy ritual she is offering her beloved friend. It is a sacred action which is priceless. The pound of perfume is worthless compared to the price Jesus will soon pay for his faith. Mary's extravagant gesture of uninhibited love is of far more value than the perfume itself. This blessing empowers him for the next phase of his ministry in which he holds fast to his conviction, even in the face of death.

Jesus' last statement has often been misused as reason to neglect the poor. "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." The first phrase is a commandment to care for the poor from the book of Deuteronomy (15:11). It will always be necessary to care for those who are poor; this is part of our covenant with God and our neighbor. As God is generous to us, we are called to lavish compassion and service upon those in need. But Jesus is also reminding his followers that his presence among us is limited. There is a sense of urgency to respond to Jesus while he is still with them. Mary has recognized this and responds with her act of love. It is important to give to the poor, but it is also acceptable to give generously as an expression of gratitude.

According to the dictionary, extravagance is a great outlay of money or resources exceeding the limits of reason or necessity. Mary's gift seems outlandish, and yet it is small compared to the gift of Jesus' life given by God and the gift of Jesus' death given by Jesus. This is not unlike God's love, which

is far more abundant than we can ever earn or deserve. When we receive of this awesome gift, we feel moved to respond, as did Mary.

The responses of the three major characters in the story are so human. There are times in which we feel like Mary, richly blessed and overwhelmed with gratitude, that we need to express ourselves in a profound and meaningful way. Many of us have days like Judas, when we feel stingy, selfish and critical. We want our share of the wealth and don't like to see resources foolishly squandered. Sometimes we can relate to Jesus and graciously accept the unexpected gifts of grace that others offer.

How much are we called to give of ourselves? How much is enough? How much is too much – reckless, foolish, excessive, extravagant? A story is told from the life of Thomas A. Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury in the 12th century (1162-1170 C.E.). When Thomas was a baby, his mother would weigh him in a basket on his birthdays, then fill the basket with coins, food, and clothing to the identical weight of the child. Then she would go and share her good fortune and joy with the poor. She gave in the same measure that God had given to her.²

Mary finds the freedom to be extravagant when she recognizes how much Jesus has given to her. What value would you place on getting the life of a loved one back? How could you express gratitude to someone who has saved your life? The value of the perfume Mary pours on Jesus' feet may seem to her not an extravagance at all, but a pittance when compared to the value of what Jesus has given to her. When we come to the cross of Christ and consider the infinite and eternal significance of God in Christ reconciling the world to himself, then we have come face to face with extravagance. Moderation and respectability are thrown to the wind.

A few years ago I was part of a circle of friends supporting a colleague through years of severe depression brought on by several traumatic events in her early life and adult life. She endured therapy, hospitalizations, and medication, only to suffer declining emotional health. When she was near bottom, a program was found in Denver offering the kind of treatment that could finally be the turning point. Her financial resources were drained; the treatment was not covered by insurance; and it cost \$15,000-20,000 for three weeks. Our small circle of friends invited others to offer prayers, support, and financial assistance to send our colleague to Denver. Mark and I took \$1,000 out of savings to start the fund. We took a risk, stepped out on faith, and arranged for a loan in our names. Within a week's time, through e-mails and phone calls we received pledges of \$12,000 from pastors and lay members of our Annual Conference. I flew our friend to Denver to admit her to the program. It was not an easy or quick fix; years of hard work followed the treatment program. We also suffered the scorn of a few who thought we were co-dependents and foolish to make such

an investment in the life of a human being. We understood it to be the response required of those who follow Jesus. Ten years later our friend is now a therapist, using her experience and skills to offer new life and hope to others. Though extravagant, it was indeed a worthy investment that continues to bear rich fruit.

Commander Richard Jadick has a new book out called, *On Call in Hell: A Doctor's Iraq War Story*. He is a Navy doctor who volunteered for duty in Iraq when he learned of the shortage of doctors. He was assigned to a Marine regiment initiating the attack on insurgents in Fallujah. It was a bloody battle.

In treating traumatic injuries, there is something known as the golden hour. A badly injured person who gets to the hospital within an hour is much more likely to be saved. But Jadick knew that in combat the "golden hour" doesn't exist. Left unaided, said Jadick, the wounded "could die in 15 minutes, and there are some things that could kill them in six minutes. If they had an arterial bleed, it could be three minutes."

He wanted to set up an emergency room in the middle of the battlefield. Loading up two armored ambulances, he convoyed into the city in the dead of night to establish an aid station in the prayer room of an old government building. Jadick and his men found some metal plates in the street, cleaned them and draped them with sterile gauze as trays for his scalpels. They stacked sandbags by the windows. The night was quiet, but at sunrise the silence was broken by sniper fire. Jadick and his medical assistants were prepared. His commanding officer stated that it is believed that 30 lives were saved because Jadick worked at the front line. He was awarded the Bronze Star with a Combat V for valor.³

Risky? Foolish? Excessive? Sacrificial? Loving? All of the above and more: Life-saving. Priceless.

In his beautiful hymn reflecting on the love of God expressed on the cross, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," Isaac Watts writes, "Were the whole realm of nature mine, That were an offering far too small; Love so amazing, so divine, Demands my soul, my life, my all?"

Indeed the extravagant, boundless love of God demands our priceless response. May the fragrance of generosity and love be a hallmark of our lives.

¹ Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), p.147.

² G. Curtis Jones, *One Thousand Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching* (Nashville: Broadman, 1986).

³ *Newsweek*, March 20, 2006.

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