

## Extravagant Love

*April 6, 2009 – John 12:1-11*

### The Anointing of Jesus' Feet

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."

When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

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Let us pray: *Gracious God, open the hearts, minds and ears of us gathered here, that we might discern your will for our lives and the church. Help us to see the ways in which we can become extravagant with our love. Amen.*

When I read this story recently again for our time this Holy Week, I realized something I hadn't before. It is well known that Jesus had a close friendship with this family in Bethany. The only time we hear of Jesus sobbing with grief is in the previous chapter when he hears of Lazarus dying.

And so six days before the Passover he returns to Bethany, to the home of his friends. I suddenly realized that Jesus was taking refuge with those he loved and trusted before he was to enter Jerusalem and face death.

And it is Mary that comes to his feet and whether she knew it or not, took care of him extravagantly before his death and burial.

Jesus sought this family out as a haven, and there are those in our lives that will do the same with us. We are to give them our very best.

I heard recently a Pastor speak from a large church in Dallas, and he said, if your congregation wants to become more hospitable, start at home. Become more hospitable towards your spouse, your children, your parents, your friends.

We must start at home as Mary and Martha did, and the rest of our lives have a chance of being patterned by this love.

For each of us, there is a circle of friends and family that surround us. They may take refuge in our home or in our presence one day. And we are called to attend to them in a way that maybe no other can.

Mary gave Jesus the very best of herself, not only with pure nard, but also through her humility and love.

But this story is not only about Mary, out of Judas' greed he humiliates her gesture. He challenges her loving act towards Jesus.

If you've ever been in a committee meeting, Judas' objection might sound all too familiar. One of the missions of Northwest Hills is the Homeless Breakfast, and someone was reporting on our participation in this longtime ministry. We give around \$300 for one breakfast once a month.

And the murmuring began, \$300 for one breakfast? Quickly our participant explained, with a mere \$300 we feed 300 people, no more than a \$1 per person. And with that \$300 we provided a feast of biscuits, sausage, gravy, eggs, jelly, butter, salsa, coffee and juice.

The cost of the breakfast was miniscule compared to the size of the extravagant feast. And for some of those 300 fed it would be only one of two meals they would receive that week.

Mary's example was of extravagant love and Judas' objection was quickly protested by Jesus. He responds, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." Now some folks in the church have used this confusing statement to justify inaction towards the poor.

But there are a few different thoughts on why he chose this confusing language. There was a Jewish tradition that it was the caring of the dead that took priority.

Alternatively, the phrase he quoted is from Deuteronomy, and it is a Rabbinic teaching practice to say one line that actually recalls something greater in the full text. For instance, we are often puzzled by Jesus' words, "Lord, why have you forsaken me?" Here he is quoting the opening line from Psalm 22, which ends on a different note:

<sup>25</sup>From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him. <sup>30</sup>Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told

about the Lord,<sup>31</sup> and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.

In our story today, Jesus quotes the first half of Deut 15:11. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.

In this moment, it's fair to suggest that Jesus may be saying to Judas, I command you to be like Mary, who has opened her hand to her brother, and she has given the best of herself.

She showed Jesus her love extravagantly. But as the church, we don't only have Mary of Bethany as a model for Extravagant love, her act points us to what Jesus is about to do.

This Holy week is leading up to his death, and we remember the extent of his sacrifice on behalf of those he loved. He loved the sinners of this world so overwhelmingly that he gave all that he could of himself.

As members of the Body of Christ, do we give all we can of ourselves for Jesus' sake? We are his hands and feet in this world, do we do him justice?

The Church does not exist for itself, our faith does not belong to us. The Church exists for the world's sake, and our faith has been given to us for the sake of those in our path who need us to be their refuge.

We are called to be Christ's presence in this world, not Judas'. Too often our faith is about us, what we want and need, instead of about what we can give, what we can do, what we can sacrifice.

What good is our faith if it is only self-serving, what good is our local church if its ministries stay within its own walls? Think about it, is our presence, as the Body of Christ, in our communities of North Austin Excessive? Overgenerous? Extravagant?

Often, our churches become bogged down with what we need to do to survive, instead of focusing on what we can lavishly pour upon our brothers and sisters.

We are called to love extravagantly, within our families, within our circle of strangers, and through our church to a hurting world. We might risk embarrassment, and that our actions are misunderstood,

but it means ultimately we might also reflect the enormous length Christ would go to love us extravagantly.