

“Extravagance”

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John 12:1-8

Jesus stopped in to see his dear friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus before heading to Jerusalem for the last time. I imagine most of us know the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the grave. This scene happens very shortly after that miraculous occurrence. At that time, Mary and Martha sent for Jesus saying, “Lord, your dear friend is very sick.” A couple verses later, John tells us, “Jesus loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus.” These friends called him Lord, so they knew who Jesus was, but they were in a different category than his disciples. They were his beloved friends, and I get the sense that their home was a place where Jesus could relax a bit. And He surely could use some relaxing, for there were great pressures on Him. According to John, it was raising Lazarus from the grave that had both brought Jesus many additional believers *and* had most angered the religious leaders. In chapters 11 and 12, we read about how many now believed in Jesus after seeing Lazarus raised, but some went to tell the Pharisees what had happened, and those Pharisees and other religious leaders realized they had trouble on their hands. John tells us in 11:53, “So from that day on they planned to put him to death.” Jesus’ hour was coming soon, and He went to visit His dear friends one more time. There they were, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, with Lazarus’ very presence signifying that death does not have the final word.

And it was at this gathering that Mary did something quite strange. There’s no getting around it; this was a bizarre act. She gets a pound of costly perfume – perfume worth nearly a year’s wages for a day laborer. This was definitely some expensive stuff. To think about it in current terms, this was worth, maybe, 15, 20, 30 *thousand* dollars. I cannot imagine perfume worth that much money, but that’s how the story goes.

And this perfume wasn’t exactly like White Diamonds or Chanel No. 5. It was a very thick essential oil, made from the crushed stems of a plant called spikenard, found in India. Such oil would be very aromatic and was used as a perfume or incense.

Mary takes this extravagant amount of oil and anoints Jesus’ feet, then wipes them with her hair. John notes “The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.” The aroma would have been quite evident, but even more so was the action of Mary. Mary knows this is the end for her dear friend and Lord, Jesus, and she takes the time and resources that she has to show him her love – and to signify what is next for Jesus. She could take this expensive oil and anoint Jesus’ head as a king, but instead she symbolically anoints his feet for burial.

I love how renowned preacher Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story:

“When Mary stood before Jesus with that pound of pure nard in her hand, it could have gone either way. She could have anointed his head and everyone there could have proclaimed him a king. But she did not do that. When she moved toward him, she dropped to her knees instead and poured the perfume on his feet, which could only mean one thing. The only man who got his feet anointed was a dead man, and Jesus knew it. ‘Leave her alone,’ he said to those who would have prevented her. *Let her finish delivering the message.*”¹

Jesus would not have been anointed for burial because He would be dying as a criminal, but Mary’s act remedied that. Mary knew that Jesus’ hour had come. Jesus had told His disciples over and over, and they didn’t get it, but Mary got it, and she responded to her Lord, to her dear friend, with lavish devotion, with extravagance.

John tells us that Judas was there, too, and Judas didn’t get it. He balked at the great expense of the perfume. This was, after all, worth three hundred denarii, or essentially a full year’s wages for the average day laborer. *A year’s wages.* That’s a lot of perfume. That’s a lot of money. And so, Judas asked why the perfume wasn’t sold and the proceeds given to the poor. Now, that sounds like a reasonable question, but Jesus, of course, sees through the dishonesty in Judas. John fills us in so that we, too, can understand. He tells us that Judas was a thief who stole from the common purse. So, Jesus responds to Judas with something that has been misused over the years. He says that we will always have the poor with us, but the disciples only had Jesus for a little while longer. Some have used that to suggest that we are not called to help the poor, but even a quick look at the words and acts of Jesus will show us that was not what He intended. His words actually were reminiscent of Deuteronomy 15:11, which says “There will always be some in the land who are poor. *That is why I am commanding you to share freely with the poor...*” Jesus wasn’t telling Judas or us that we should not take care of the poor. He was saying that there was a limited time to respond to Him in person, and Mary was doing just that. She was responding extravagantly, and there is nothing wrong with that. Help the poor, yes, but respond to Jesus with worship, as well.

Mary responded with great love.

A little boy’s pediatrician told him that he could save his little sister’s life by giving her some blood. His six-year old sister was near death, a victim of a disease from which the boy had made a miraculous recovery two years earlier. The little girl’s only chance for restoration was a blood transfusion from someone who had previously conquered the illness. Since the children both had the same rare blood type, the boy was an ideal donor.

“Johnny, would you like to give your blood for Mary?” the doctor asked. The boy hesitated. His lower lip started to tremble. Then he smiled and said, “OK, I’ll do it. I’ll give my blood for my sister.” Soon both children were wheeled into an operating room. Mary was thin and pale. Johnny was robust and full of life. Neither of them spoke.

¹ http://day1.org/1760-the_prophet_mary

As Johnny's blood siphoned into Mary's veins, one could almost see new life come into her tired little body. The ordeal was nearly over when Johnny's brave voice broke the silence, “So, Doc, when do I die?”

It was then that the doctor realized what the moment of hesitation had meant earlier. Johnny believed that giving his blood to sister meant giving up his life. In that brief moment, he had made his great decision.

Like Mary, he responded with great love.

Mary's act was one of total praise, and despite Judas' rebuke, Jesus accepted her praise as He accepts our praise. Jesus is not physically among us, so anointing his feet with expensive perfume is not something that we can do. Our acts of praise come in other ways. Our acts of great love come in living lives of praise. Our acts of praise include faithful participation in the life of the church. Our acts of total praise include faithful giving of our time, talents, and resources—financial and otherwise—to the works of Christ on earth today. We respond to the love of Jesus for us by serving those He told us to, the least of these, knowing that in feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, taking care of the sick, and visiting the imprisoned, we are serving Jesus himself. We are offering our extravagant love and our praise to our Savior.

There was so much going on that day at the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. The memory and emotions of Lazarus's death and being brought back to life by Jesus were ever-present in the room, along with the knowledge that Jesus' own death was imminent. Jesus would soon be in Jerusalem, convicted in a farcical trial, and sentenced to death. On this day, Mary's act would anoint Him for his burial, and her love would show us a profound example. In Mark's account of this scene, he ends it with Jesus saying, “She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.” In rabbinic literature, there is a saying, “The fragrance of good oil is diffused from the bedroom to the dining hall, but a good name is diffused from one end of the world to the other.” Just as the aroma of this expensive oil spread throughout the home, Mary's good name and the story of her act have been spread around the world. Today, around the world, the good news is being proclaimed as we remember Mary's gracious act of extravagant love for her Savior.

So, what do *our* acts of praise and love for our Lord look like? Extravagant praise and love for our Savior can come in many forms. David Lose, president of Lutheran Seminary at Philadelphia, writes about visiting Central Methodist Church in Johannesburg, South Africa, which at that time was housing over three thousand refugees. The pastor of the church said “I spend more time talking about sewage than I do about the gospel.” Bear with me here, but maybe our devotion to our Lord is measured in how much we deal with the issues that affect the people He has called us to serve, whether that is sewage, or water quality, or food, or housing, or justice, or equality, or education, or jobs, or respect, or love, or whatever it may be.

Judas cannot see the new world ushered in by Jesus. But Mary sees it, and she responds the best way she knows how. She showed her Savior great love, affection, and devotion. How can we do the same? How do we leave this place and show extravagant love for our Lord? It will look different for each of us, for we are all called to a different walk. Some may take food to a hungry person. Some may work for justice and dignity for those sorely lacking it. Some may give of their hard-earned resources to the work of the church. Some may teach English to newcomers to this country. Some may serve on committees or volunteer to work with children and youth. Some may help with service agencies or support the ministry of mission co-workers. Some may travel near or far to assist others in need. Some may smile warmly and give an extra-large tip to the harried server at the restaurant. Some may open their homes to a child in need of permanency. Some may show the love of God to everyone they meet in simple acts of kindness. Many will do things that others of us have not thought of, or might even think foolish or unwise. The Judases of the world may scoff, but Jesus says “Leave them alone. They have done what they could.” What more could be asked of us? In all that we do, this day and always, may we show extravagant love to our Lord and Savior. Amen.