

The 5th Sunday in Lent: Holy Trinity Church: April 3, 2022

John 12:1-8 *It is okay to be extravagant!*

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ, the point of this Gospel story from John is this: sometimes it's O.K. to be extravagant! Now, that is precisely what this story in the Gospel of John is all about. Remember the story with me. Jesus is on His way to the cross. It is just a few days before Passover. The chief priests and scribes are plotting against Him. Judas is about ready to betray Him. The crucifixion is less than a week away and Jesus knows it. Jesus and His disciples stop at Bethany, just a few days before, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead there in Bethany. Now, as they are having dinner, a woman comes to Jesus and does a beautiful but extravagant thing for our Lord. The Gospel of John tells us that the woman was Mary, (the sister of Martha and Lazarus). Mary brings an alabaster jar of very expensive

ointment. She breaks open the jar and pours the costly perfumed oil on Jesus' head. Mary anoints His head with oil.

So, why did she do that? Some say it was an act of gratitude in which she was thanking Jesus for raising her brother Lazarus from the dead. Some say it was an act of consecration in which she was anointing Jesus to encourage Him to go into the Holy City and do what had to be done. Others say it was a foreshadowing, an act of preparation, in which she was anointing His body for the death which was to come in Jerusalem a few days later. Scripture scholars say, it was an act of love and kindness.

But the Gospel story doesn't end there. After doing this beautiful act, Mary is reprimanded by Judas Iscariot because she was so wasteful. *"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"*

Judas 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."

Jesus reprimands Judas for being so "stingy." Judas is thinking, "What a waste!" Judas was probably surprised and taken aback when Jesus complimented Mary on what she had done.

Let's set the context. Mary and Martha preparing dinner for Jesus. It is Six days before the Passover and Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with Jesus. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. Think about this, the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume, the food is cooking on the stove. The wine flows and there is laughter in the air as the apostles join them. Mary and Marth and Lazarus are extravagant.

If you lived strictly by the Judas mind-set, you would have no parish hall connected to the church, no flowers on the altar, no art, no robes for the choir, no fine organ, no beautiful weddings. How about when your daughter comes to you and says, "Mom and Dad, I'm in love and I'm so happy and I want to get married." And what would you say, "Well, why don't you just elope? It's so much cheaper. Yeah that's the ticket, it would be wasteful to have a wedding. Look Honey, forget get about a wedding. Buy a house." But the Mary mind-set says, "Sometimes in the name of love and kindness and gratefulness, it's O.K. Indeed, it's beautiful to be extravagant." Let me show you what I mean.

Another way ‘To Be Extravagant’ in Our Gratitude. Maybe that’s what Mary was doing that day in Bethany, expressing her indescribable thanksgiving to Jesus. Sometimes words just aren’t big enough and perhaps this extravagant act was her way of trying to say “thank you” to her Lord for all that He had done for them, and most of all for the most recent act of calling her brother Lazarus out of the grave.

Let me share with you a wonderful story about a woman who was known far and wide for her grateful spirit. Even when she was diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer and told me that she only had three months to live, still she maintained that twinkle in her eye, that terrific sense of humor, and that radiant spirit of gratitude. She went to see me to plan her memorial service, and with a laugh she told me, “Don’t you make this a somber or sad occasion, or I’ll come back to haunt you! I’ve had a great life and I am so thankful for so many things, so let’s concentrate on making this a celebration of my life in this world and the next.” Together, we selected the hymns and the scriptures and then she said, “Oh yes, there’s one more thing; I want to help you with your message.” “How’s that?” I asked. And she said, “I want to be buried with a fork in my right hand.” When I heard that request, I remembered a man who wanted a bottle of Glenlivet Scotch Whiskey placed in his casket. I could understand that, but a fork in her right hand that was something else.

“Are you shocked by that request, she asked?” I said no, because a friend of mine buried a perfectly good bottle of Glenlivet Scotch Whiskey. No, I am no longer curious, I replied. The woman went on to explain to me: “In all my years in the church I have attended so many eating meetings, dinners, brunches, luncheons, potluck suppers and my favorite part was when they were clearing the tables after the main course and someone would lean over and say, ‘You can keep your fork.’ That was my favorite part because I knew that meant something better was coming! I was so grateful for what I had already and now something better was coming! “So, when people come to the funeral home and see me in my casket, they are going to say, ‘What’s with the fork? And then, Fr. John at the service you can get up and tell my story and you can tell them for me that I am so grateful for what I’ve already had but I’m keeping my fork because I know that something even better is coming!”

So, my sisters and brothers, let me ask you something: Do you have that kind of victorious spirit? Do you have that kind of deep faith? Do you have that kind of extravagant gratefulness? If not, then why not? Because Jesus taught us that it’s O.K. to be extravagant in our generosity and in our gratitude.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, here is the challenge for the 5th Sunday of Lent: Third and Finally, It’s O.k. To Be Extravagant in Our Graciousness.

One thing is clear. Whatever meanings scripture scholars may attach to Mary's act of anointing Jesus with precious oil, it was without question an act of love and kindness and graciousness.

This last story is about Tess, a precocious eight-year-old little girl. One day she heard her mom and dad talking in a serious and somber tone about her little brother, Andrew. Tess didn't understand everything that they were saying, but she was smart, and Tess got the gist of it: Her little brother, Andrew, was very, very sick and they were completely out of money. They would have to move out of their house and move into a small apartment because Mom and Dad didn't have enough money for the doctor bills and the house payment. On top of that, only a very expensive surgery could save Andrew now, and they could not find anyone to lend them the money. Just then, Tess heard her dad say to her tearful mother in whispered desperation, "Only a miracle can save our Andrew now."

Tess ran to her room, pulled out a glass jelly jar from its hiding place in her closet. She poured out all the change on the floor and counted it carefully. She then put the change back in the jar, put the jar under her arm, slipped out the back door and ran down to the Rexall Drug Store six blocks away. The pharmacist was talking to a man intently and at first, he didn't notice Tess

standing there. She waited patiently for a while and then dramatically cleared her throat, but still, no luck – the pharmacist did not see her. Finally, Tess got his attention by taking a quarter out of her jelly jar and tapping it on the glass counter. That did it. The pharmacist noticed her and said, “Just a minute. I’m talking to my brother from Chicago whom I haven’t seen for ages.”

“Well,” said Tess, “I want to talk to you about my brother. He’s really, sick – and I want to buy a miracle. His name is Andrew and he has something growing inside his head and my daddy says only a miracle can save him now. So, mister how much does a miracle cost? I have the money here to pay for it. It’s all that I have saved. If it isn’t enough, I will get the rest. Just tell me how much a miracle cost.” The pharmacist’s brother was a well-dressed man. He stooped down and asked Tess, “What kind of miracle does your brother need?” “I don’t know,” Tess replied, with her eyes welling up. “I just know he’s really sick and Mommy says he needs an operation. But my parents can’t pay for it, so I want to use my money.” “How much do you have?” asked the man from Chicago. “One dollar and eleven cents!” Tess said proudly. “It’s all the money I have in the world, but I can get some more if I need to.” “Well, you are in luck,” the man said with a smile. “One dollar and eleven cents are the exact price of a miracle for little brothers.”

He took the money in one hand and with the other he took hold of her mitten and said, “Take me to where you live. I want to see your brother and meet your parents. Let’s see if I have the kind of miracle you need.” That well-dressed man from Chicago was Dr. Carlton Armstrong who just happened to be a noted neurosurgeon. The operation was successfully completed without charge, and it wasn’t long until Andrew was home again and doing well. Tess’s mom and dad were so grateful. They were talking one night about the chain of events that had saved Andrew’s life. “That surgery,” her mom said, “was a real miracle.” And then she said, “I just wonder how much it would have cost.” Tess smiled. She knew exactly how much a miracle cost, one dollar and eleven cents plus, the skill and graciousness of a great doctor, and of course, the gracious, sacrificial love of an eight-year-old big sister!

My sisters and brothers in Christ, someone might say, “Well, it was only one dollar and eleven cents,” but, it was all she had! She gave all she had to save her little brother, and that’s an extravagant gift! Isn’t that a great story? It’s powerful because it reminds us in a dramatic way that the spirit of Jesus Christ can empower and enable us to be extravagant in our generosity, to be extravagant in our gratitude, and to be extravagant in our graciousness.

AMEN.