

Encounters with Jesus: A Holy, Extravagant Waste

John 12:1-8

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Churches of Portland and Decatur, Indiana on March 19, 2017]

I

A man in New York City was kidnapped, and his kidnappers called his wife and asked for a ransom of \$100,000.

She talked them down to \$30,000.

The story had a happy ending:

the man returned home unharmed,
the money was recovered,
and the kidnappers were apprehended and sent to jail.

But, you have to wonder what happened when the man got home and found out that his wife got him back for big a discount?

Calvin Trillin imagined what the negotiations must have been like:

"\$100,000 for that old guy? You have got to be crazy. Just look at him! Look at that gut! You want \$100,000 for that?...Give me a break. \$30,000 is my top offer."

I don't know about you, but I would like to think that if I were in a similar situation, there would be people who would spare no expense to get me back.

They wouldn't haggle over the price,
they wouldn't say,
"Well, let me think about it."

I would like to think that they would say,
"We'll do anything we can to get him back safe and sound—
no expense spared!"

The point of the story: sometimes it's good to be extravagant!

II

And that is precisely what today's story from the Gospel of John is about—
A Holy, Extravagant Waste.

John 12 brings us to the epicenter.

It is the day before Jesus will ride into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey,
setting off a huge public demonstration that will lead to his arrest, trial, and
execution.

Already his fate has been sealed.

When word reaches the religious and political authorities in Jerusalem that Jesus
has brought a dead man back to life
and many people were now following him,
the authorities, ever wary of upsetting the Roman occupation forces,
decide that it will be best for everyone if they can find a way to
get rid of him.

“Better for one man to die than the whole nation to be destroyed,” says the high
priest Caiaphas—
an unpleasant but prudent executive decision.

In fact, they have issued an order that if anyone sees Jesus, they are to report it
immediately so he can be arrested before he causes any more trouble.

So that is the context of our gospel reading.

Jesus' dear friends, Mary, Martha, and their brother Lazarus,
so recently restored to life,
have arranged a dinner party in their home at Bethany,
just two miles outside Jerusalem.

There is a real element of danger surrounding this encounter,
since Jesus is a wanted man, under a sentence of death.

Guests at a dinner party reclined on cushions around a low table.

They would dip chunks of bread into a bowl of olive oil.

They eat olives, dates, figs, pomegranates and,
if it is an especially festive occasion, lamb.

They drink wine from cups if the host is affluent,
or, if not, from a common cup.

At this dinner, as usual, Martha is doing the serving—

Martha, who just a few days before was scolding Jesus for showing up late
after her brother had died,

Martha, who was the first person to put into words the conviction of her
heart, our first confession of faith:

“Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God.”

Have you noticed how women in these 2,000-year-old stories are assertive,
opinionated, and smart, and insist on being taken seriously at a time and in a
culture when that was not the norm?

III

So Jesus is there, as are Lazarus, Mary, and Martha,
and some of Jesus’ disciples and friends are there.

There is pleasant small talk about the weather and the wine,
laughter,
conviviality—

probably to avoid talking about the impending disaster
everyone knows is just ahead.

In the midst of it, without warning, Mary pours a jar of expensive perfume on
Jesus’ feet and then, of all things, proceeds to loosen her hair, tied tightly in braids,
and dry his feet.

It was expensive perfume...perhaps Mary’s lifetime supply.

A fragrant aroma fills the entire house that had only recently been filled with the
sounds of mourning and the smell of death’s decay.

The perfume probably came from India.

You used it sparingly, carefully,
 to sprinkle a few drops on yourself for a special occasion,
 or to anoint the dead body of a loved one.

You did not pour it out,
 waste it,
 or use it extravagantly.

And, of course, there was the intimacy of the gesture—
 the feet, the loosened hair.

Some commentators can't resist suggesting sexual or romantic implications.

Was she really anointing his body for death?

Was she overwhelmed with gratitude that her brother was alive and they
 were together again?

Whatever else it was, it was an act of extreme extravagance,
 a very public act of deep devotion and love.

After Jesus' death his body will be anointed for burial again,
 but in secret by men who are afraid to confess their faith openly.

Mary has offered her gesture of devotion in full view of others while Jesus still
 lives.

IV

“What a waste...what a foolish waste,” someone says out loud.

It's Judas, the group's treasurer.

He holds the purse,
 accepts contributions,
 pays the bills,
 and, John tells us,
 skims a little off the top for himself.

Judas's question, however, is not unreasonable.

Good Session members and trustees and board members will ask the same question.

“Why wasn’t the perfume sold and the money given to the poor?”

The perfume could have been sold for 300 denarii.

At the time one denarius was a day’s wage,
so three hundred denarii is nearly a year’s income.

That’s a lot of money; it could do a lot of good.

It’s a common question in church life:

Should we really invest tens of thousands of dollars in a new organ,
or would it be better if we gave the money to the homeless ministry?

Should we put new carpet in the sanctuary,
or send the money to World Vision to feed the hungry in Haiti?

Large institutions hire consultants to help them know how best to use their assets to achieve long-term goals.

Giving it all away for love,
pouring out a valuable asset on someone’s feet,
isn’t ordinarily among the recommendations.

Jesus comes to Mary’s defense:

“She’s been keeping the perfume for my burial, which could happen any day now. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

V

George Bernanos in his classic novel, “The Diary of a Country Priest,” called verse 8 “the saddest verse in the Bible.”

It’s a verse you frequently hear quoted, especially by opponents of government programs to help poor people.

Two weeks ago a congressman from Kansas, Rep. Roger Marshall, cited this verse to argue against expanding Medicaid as part of the Affordable Care Act (aka Obamacare) because (I quote):

“Just like Jesus said, ‘The poor will always be with us.’ There is a group of people that just don’t want health care and aren’t going to take care of themselves.”

He went on to say,

“...I’m not judging, I’m just saying socially that’s where they are. So there’s a group of people that even with unlimited access to health care are only going to use the emergency room when their arm is chopped off or when their pneumonia is so bad they get brought [into] the ER.”

He said this despite much evidence to the contrary, including a study by the Harvard School of Public Health which stated,

Two years after Medicaid coverage was expanded under the Affordable Care Act (ACA) in their states, low-income adults in Kentucky and Arkansas received more primary and preventive care, made fewer emergency department visits, and reported higher quality care and improved health compared with low-income adults in Texas, which did not expand Medicaid.

So let’s pause for a moment to observe that Jesus was quoting from the book of Deuteronomy, which perhaps shows that Rep. Marshall is a better politician than Bible student.

This is what Deuteronomy 15:10-11 says:

Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.

Thoughtful people can disagree about the best ways to respond to the needs of those who are living in poverty,
and we can debate various policy and legislative proposals for providing health care to needy people—

indeed, this is a debate we are having in our country right now.

But to cite “the poor you always have with you” as a reason not to institute programs to address the root causes of poverty and to oppose legislation to strengthen the social safety net and help raise people out of poverty is a distortion of scripture and certainly not what Jesus meant.

Jesus, after all, spent his entire life among mostly poor people.

He had more to say about wealth, poverty and economic justice than any other topic.

It is, however, a reasonable question:

Why not use the valuable resource to do some good?

Why waste it?

The question deserves thoughtful attention.

When times are tough, is it appropriate to fill the church with poinsettias at Christmas and lilies on Easter?

When the homeless poor are lined up at the door,
is it right to fix the pipe organ?

The answer is not so simple, as Jesus tried to teach Judas.

Sometimes, apparently, there is nothing more important than the impulse to act extravagantly and beautifully out of a heart full of love.

That’s what Mary did—
she poured out her heart,
her deep love,
and her hope.

She put herself at great risk by so publically identifying herself with Jesus,
and she risked the immediate ridicule and disdain of the rational and reasonable men around her,
one of whom, in fact, tried to call her out.

VI

The great 20th century theologian Paul Tillich has some of the best commentary on this story.

About Mary he said,

“She has performed an act of holy waste growing out of the abundance of her heart...Jesus (alone) knows that without the abundance of heart nothing great can happen. . . . He knows that calculating love is not love at all.”

Tillich continues:

“The history of humankind is the history of men and women who wasted themselves and were not afraid to do so. They did not fear to waste themselves in the service of a new creation. They wasted out of the fullness of their hearts.”

Without the abundance of heart nothing great can happen.

No doubt Tillich was thinking of those imprudent and passionate souls, like his fellow German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who spoke out against the policies of the Nazi government under Hitler and paid dearly for it, those brave enough to risk life itself, and who often lost their lives, because their hearts were so full of love for their nation, for truth and justice, that they would not allow themselves to be reasonable and prudent and silent.

So Tillich writes:

“People are sick, not only because they have not received love but also because they are not allowed to give love, to waste themselves.”

There is a remarkable scene in the film *The Young Victoria*.

Victoria, in her early twenties, is now Queen of England and Great Britain. Her childhood and youth have been absolutely controlled. She has been reared to be queen. She has been schooled in every appropriate word to

speak and gesture to make. She cannot descend a staircase without her hand properly placed in the hand of a lady-in-waiting.

And then she falls in love with Albert, a German prince. After a very proper and controlled courtship, they marry, partly for political reasons. In the process, however, they fall wildly, passionately in love.

On their honeymoon, in the middle of a horseback ride they are caught in a rain storm. They stand under a grove of trees, waiting patiently.

But then something wonderful happens: they look in each others' eyes and love simply overcomes restraint and control and they hold hands and run out into the rain, across a soggy field, laughing. Albert falls down, in the mud, and we see the Queen of England and her Prince Consort acting like giddy, love-struck teenagers.

How sad to live your whole life and never have loved so deeply that you did something so foolish,
 so extravagant,
 that it makes you blush to think about it.

How sad to have lived your whole life
 without ever throwing caution to the wind
 and doing something wonderfully outrageous.

How sad never to have loved so much that you would have given everything—
 even your life itself—
 for the sake of that love.

Presbyterian theologian Frederick Buechner writes that if ever the church is destroyed, it will not be...

"...just from without by a world that sees it as a dead-end street but by people like you and me who destroy it from within by our deadness and staleness, our failure to be brave, to be human, to take chances."

Again Paul Tillich wrote:

"Do not suppress in yourselves the abundant heart, the waste of self-surrender. . . . Keep yourself open for the creative moment. Do not suppress

the impulse to do what Mary did at Bethany. You will be reproached as she was. But Jesus was on her side and he is also on yours.”

VII

The day after Mary’s extravagant act of love,
Jesus will climb on a donkey and ride into the city of Jerusalem.

It is Palm Sunday—the beginning of Holy Week.

The Last Supper,
the arrest,
the trial,
and the Crucifixion
are all imminent.

I wonder: what was it like for Jesus?

He knew about the charges that had been leveled against him—
that he was a rabble-rouser,
that he disrespected the traditions of his religion,
that he was a disturber of the peace,
that he was a threat to the *Pax Romana*.

He knew that people were calling him Messiah, Lord, King.

He knew it would cost him his life.

It would have been altogether reasonable and prudent and understandable had he
turned around and headed north,
back to Galilee,
out of harm’s way;
had he withdrawn from view for a while,
resumed his teaching in the synagogue,
practiced a little carpentry,
and lived to a ripe old age.

There were plenty of people who advised him to do just that.

Instead, he had dinner with his friends,
allowed Mary her act of holy extravagant love,

and then the next morning rode into Jerusalem...
to his death.

What a waste!

What an amazing, magnificent, holy, extravagant waste!

Amen.

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