

Sue Ann Schmidt  
John 12:1-8  
Hudson  
3-25-2007

### “Extravagant Love”

Intro to text: Mary and Martha are beyond grateful to Jesus. Remember how that went? Their brother, Lazarus, was near death and they knew of nothing else to do but send for Jesus, their dear friend. But Jesus was over by the Jordan teaching and healing, and by the time they got word to him – it was too late. By the time Jesus made it over to Bethany, Lazarus had been in the tomb 4 days. So Jesus orders the tomb unsealed, as Martha protests so delicately, “But, Lord, the smell....” Jesus calls from the entrance, “Lazarus, come out!” ...and like some scene in *Return of the Mummy*, out comes Lazarus, trailing burial cloths. The whole event was too much for the religious establishment of the day, and from that day forth, we read, *the Sanhedrin began to plot Jesus’ death.*

Today we hear what happened the next time Jesus visited Bethany.

[ read John 12:1-8]

Six days before Passover, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (brother and sisters) hold a dinner party – good friends, good food, good fellowship, an exciting, celebration of joy and gratitude. Martha is in the kitchen (of course) – doing what Martha does best: hustling, bustling, and being hospitable as she prepares a delicious feast for all her guests. Can you smell it? Baking bread, roasting meat, wine poured out; the scent of friendship and camaraderie. What a great day!

Lazarus, recently given new life, is at table along with the others. Enters Mary, their sister, the one who likes to sit at Jesus’ feet and let her hair down. Carrying a jar of very expensive fragrant perfume-ointment (nard it’s called), she lifts the lid/pulls the cork – and without a word lavishly pours it over Jesus’ feet. ...then rubs the sweet salve into his feet ----- with her hair --- ahhh that must have felt good on travel-weary calloused feet! It would have been an unforgettable display – to say the least. That perfume...that scent...is that the odor of extravagant love?

Now the room is filled with a mix of scents – the nard is fragrant and fills the nostrils, overpowering the smells from the kitchen – where hospitality is being poured out with food and nourishment. I wonder what God’s love smells like? I can’t say that I ever thought about it before. But it must smell extravagant – like costly ointment. And then the spell is broken.

Judas, who is also at table, gets a whiff of what Mary’s done and he is outraged! Indignantly, he stands and roars, “Mary, how could you do such a wasteful thing! That perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor!” Judas knows how Jesus feels about the poor. He must have expected Jesus would join him in his outrage and also stand to say, “Mary cut it out – what a waste, go buy grain and see that it gets to the food bank in Jerusalem.” But Judas is wrong. Jesus doesn’t say that. Instead he rebukes Judas, “Leave her alone, Judas, let her keep it for the day of my burial. The poor will always be with us – but I won’t be.”

Would you spend a year's wages on a bottle of perfume? Then dump it over someone's feet? 300 denarii – \$50,000, 20,000, 100, 000!? Google tells me I can buy a 16.9 ounce bottle of a fragrance called Imperial Majesty # 1 at Harrods of London or at Bergdorf Goodman of New York, for \$215,000.00.

Extravagantly lovely or sinfully wasteful?

Outrageously beautiful or outrageously foolish?

And why Jesus' feet? The only time you anoint feet is for burial..... Ah, yes of course. Jesus, Giver of Life, is being prepared for death. Mary, in her extravagant act, prepares Jesus (and we the readers) for the most extravagant act ever – the cross.

How do we account for generosity like this? Extravagant to the point of - wasteful? No not wasteful. Where is the line? What does extravagant love smell like – indeed what does it look like? There is, in the oil, an aroma of new life: Mary's, Lazarus', ours. Our need to give. Joy released smells fragrant and fills the air with extravagant love.....

In what way do we express our faith - lavishly? How will others pick up on our generous scent; and see in it the lavishness of God?

One might have thought that Lazarus would be the one giving thanks to God for new life, but on this occasion, it is his sister Mary, who overflows with love. How do we account for such generosity, such a pouring out of gratitude? Does it come from those who truly discern the lavishness of what God has done for us?

God's love poured out for us – and our desire to return it to him, by the way we live – our attitude, our gratitude...how could we not be generous?

Bursting with love, Mary's display of emotion – bordering on sensuality – makes us uncomfortable – on more than one level. We simply don't do that – we don't get emotional about our feelings for Jesus.

Joan Salmon Campbell was the first black woman moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church a number of years back. I happened to be in attendance at the meeting when she was elected. She had such charisma that as she took office, she soon had 2000 Presbyterians singing praises – with hands raised high above our heads to God. Presbyterians don't sing like that! But we did. Without hymnals in hand, the words simply repeated as she sang them to us ... “To God be the glory, to God be the glory.....” Our faces melted into joy – like last week here when Charlie had us swaying with “I am weak but thou art strong....”

We don't do that. But we did, didn't we. How extravagant! Or was it God's grace that just took us by surprise.

Jesus told Mary what she did was beautiful, the love overflowed from her, she couldn't help herself – her extravagance was beyond rationalizing or logic – it just was.

I've been thinking all week about Mary's gift to Jesus. And I've tried to think of anything that begins to come close to this degree of extravagant love.... I've thought about the extravagance of the firemen who ran into the World Trade Center. Of stories I've read of people entering burning buildings, diving under water to retrieve people before they drown, rescue crews on snowy mountains, or hunting for children lost in the woods.

Then I thought about the extravagance of this building and how some criticized that it was too costly. Yet hardly a week goes by that I don't hear of how this lovely building is helping people in some way. I thought of the European cathedrals built at great cost while the people around them were starving.

We know Jesus taught us to care for the poor, and over and over the message is brought home as he healed the sick, fed the hungry, reached out to the lost and lonely. I read of the Anglin Family that is raising 15 children: 7 of them biologically theirs, and 8 adopted children with special needs, from a myriad of ethnic and racial backgrounds. They say their mission is to spread God's love one child at a time. These stories inspire us to also be giving, loving, and lavish.

So I struggled with this idea of Mary's extravagant pouring out of oil, until Wednesday night, at our Healing Service that Karen Verner had put together for us to offer the people of the church. Into this darkened sanctuary came about 40 worshippers, of varying needs and desires – not sure exactly what they were getting into, but certain that they wanted to find strength and courage to meet some situation in their life. “Come to me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest,” we began with Jesus' words in Matthew. And we prayed our intercessions for those who suffer, are sick, for those who minister in healing, for family and friends. We sang, “Be Still my soul, for God is on your side; trust in your God, your savior and your guide, who through all changes, faithful will remain.” And then there was the opportunity to come forward, light a candle and place it in a boxed-cross, lovingly made by a Jewish carpenter friend of Karen's - and as your candle was placed in the box, it symbolized laying down our pain at the foot of Christ's cross. Then people could come for prayer - as Peter or Dick or Karen or I laid hands on them in the quiet of this sacred space, while Joy McGuire's lovely voice sang softly in the background. And then we did indeed pour out the oil – not lavishly like Mary, just a small dab, placed on the hand, the oil of anointing that is spoken of in our lesson today – that James speaks in his letter. (James 5:14). And as the tears flowed, God's presence was so strongly felt. A time of prayer for healing and wholeness: physical, spiritual, emotional – healing of relationships, distress. None of us is exempt from needing God's healing presence.

I think that is the peace I find in hearing of Mary's extravagant love for Jesus in today's lesson from John's gospel – that our extravagant gifts to others are the only possible response we can make to our God whose love was so extravagant that it poured out the life of his son. Can we possibly calculate the debt we owe God? Can we measure the forgiveness he's already poured out on us? Where would we begin in our attempt to repay? We can't. So we do these small acts of everyday extravagance – as our way of saying “thank you God for life – and for these ways I reach out to you lavishly in love.” To God be the glory.

Amen.