

Sermon on 5 Lent C: John 12:1-8

Preached at Custer Lutheran Fellowship on 3-25-2007 by Pastor David Van Kley

EXTRAVAGANT GIFTS

There seems to be a tension among Christians today, between those who stress the praise of God and those who stress service to other people. The tension sometimes falls along denominational lines: evangelicals build large churches in the suburbs and pay praise bands thousand of dollars each week to perform music; little mainline churches in cities like Denver staff the food pantries and the homeless shelters of the city. It's simplistic, I know, but there is truth in this stereotype: those who hold their hands **up** during worship seldom hold their hands **out** to the poor during the week. **And** vice versa.

Perhaps you've felt that tension in our nation these last several years, as religion has become more and more an issue that divides people instead of uniting them. Perhaps you've felt that tension among the churches in our community. Maybe even within our own congregation!

This tension is clearly present in today's gospel. Jesus and the disciples stop by the home of their good friends in Bethany, siblings Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. Not long before, Jesus had done the unthinkable, raising Lazarus from the dead. Now, they celebrate with a meal. Martha serves, as was her custom, and Lazarus and Jesus talk at the table. Mary shocks everyone by breaking out a container of precious perfume, called **nard**. Imported all the way from the Himalayas, a pound of nard was valued at 300 denarii—a whole year's wages for a day laborer, maybe \$15,000 in our currency. We wonder where Mary would get the money to buy such a thing, but are not given an answer. We're only told that she took a whole pound of it and dumped it on Jesus' feet, then knelt to wipe them clean with her hair. It was so much perfume that the whole house smelled of it, as if a dozen people had sprayed pine-scented Lysol all over the place for an hour. An **extravagant** act of praise and hospitality! Over the top.

Judas does not approve. He asks the question that occurs to most of us: "Why was this perfume not sold and the money given to the poor? Isn't this a terrible waste?" Even though John tells us that Judas has ulterior motives for asking the question, the fact remains that it is a good question. Who would dump out fifteen grand on someone's feet? Even **Jesus'** feet?

Yet, Jesus rebukes Judas and praises Mary: "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." Puzzling words. Jesus sounds almost defensive and somewhat insensitive. Shouldn't we help the poor, even **if** they will always be with us?

Have you ever thought, how could anyone have spent so much money on the Crystal Cathedral—or any kind of cathedral—when there is such need in the world?

Has your conscience pricked you when on vacation in some city, you've seen

homeless men and women on the streets, their grubby hands outstretched?

Have you ever been bothered by the contrast between NBA players, arriving in stretch limos or movie stars lounging outside of Hollywood mansions while the same TV cameras beam into your living room pictures of malnourished children from the Horn of Africa?

Incidentally, rumor has it that Julia Roberts has bought land in Custer County. I am not making this up. Imagine that: Hollywood meets the Hitchrail! But the gap between rich and poor in our county is widening.

The other day, some people stopped by to pick up an application for the Habitat House planned for Custer this summer. As Arlene opened the door, she felt guilty to live in such a warm and lovely home, while this couple and their children occupy a run-down trailer and are excited about a one in twenty chance of being selected to own a very plain house. Meanwhile, people in other countries work 18 hours a day at \$2 per hour to produce the shoes we buy for \$40 at Wal-Mart.

Oh, the guilt and dis-ease. It's hard to think of praising God in a world where poverty grinds people to dust. "Why was this perfume not sold and the money give to the poor?" It's a good question.

Yet the question accuses us as well. After all, we are the ones who benefit from those \$40 shoes. And we are more worried about the downturn in the stock market and its impact on our finances, than about any of these things. We want our share of the pie. What was the campaign slogan a few years back? "It's the economy, stupid!" Maybe, like Judas, we protest a bit too much. Maybe, like Judas, we are on the take.

So what does this text say to us? Two amazing things. First, Jesus' interprets Mary's extravagant gift, as "anointing for the day of his burial." You see, this was only a few days before he would be arrested and put to death on a cross. Whether or not she knew it, Mary was pointing to this death. She was praising a God who suffers for and with broken human beings. A God who stands with and for the poor, with and for the grieving, with and for the sick, with and for the struggling, with and for the sinful. With and for Mary. With and for Judas. With and for us. Mary's act of praise reminds us that the cross is the center of our hope, God's power to change us and to change the world.

Mary poured out a whole pound of nard on Jesus' feet because we are **that** precious to God. So precious that God would pour out all five **liters** of **blood** for us.

Second, the word used to describe Mary **wiping** Jesus' feet is used only one other time in John, later in this same chapter, when Jesus teaches the disciples to love one another by **wiping** their feet. Which is to say that Mary's act of praise was also an act of service. That it is wrong-headed and wrong-hearted to separate the two. Praise and

service go together. Reaching up and reaching out are one and the same. The God we praise is the one who came to serve and not to be served.

Mary calls us to pour ourselves out in praise of God **by** serving others in Jesus' name.

There's only one way to do that—**all** the way! Remember the story in the Bible of the widow's mite? Jesus commends her, too, for giving all she had, her whole living, in an extravagant act of praise and service.

When we were in Nicaragua the first time, I was blown away by the extravagant hospitality of these poor people of faith. The folks we worshipped with in the small town of Aquispalapa also hosted us for the night. I will always remember that they had soda pop for us. Soda pop on ice. I have no idea how they got them: we were many miles from the nearest store: they had neither the money to buy nor the vehicle to transport such things. But that night, they were on the old, rickety table at which we feasted, by candlelight—not for effect, but because there was no electricity. We slept in the only beds the family owned. At the time, I thought, “they shouldn't be doing this. This is way over the top. They should spend the money on something they need.”

Now, I see that these people were Mary all over again. Their extravagant kindness was an act of praise and an act of service in Jesus' name. An extravagant sign of the extravagant cross.

What about you and me? If we are half-hearted about our religion, what does that say about us? This text is a powerful reminder that there is nothing halfhearted about the love of God. And we are invited to be open-hearted and open-handed in response.

This week, I learned something about Thomas a Becket, the archbishop of Canterbury, who lived almost a millennium ago. When he was a child, his parents would weight him on his birthday and then fill a basket with coins, food, and clothing to equal his weight, then give them away to another. I remember what I weighted in seventh grad: 103 pounds. And as a senior in high school, 170 pounds. That's a lot of money, food, and clothing! What an imaginative, extravagant way to live and teach the gospel!

Brothers and sisters, I'm sure that you can come up with something every bit as good. Amen.