

“GIVING UP: V - CAUTION”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
March 17, 2013

Fifth Sunday of Lent

John 12:1-8

It's funny how things work out sometimes. Last week in worship, we heard the story of the father with two sons - one of whom grabbed his inheritance and ran off only to squander it. Over the years, he's become known as the prodigal son.

Now, this week, the very next week, there's another prodigal. Only this one looks a lot different. This week it's a woman who pours ointment on Jesus. Why do I call her a prodigal? Because prodigal means “recklessly extravagant.”

Last week, the reckless extravagance displayed by the younger son was bad. This week, it's good - very, very good. Let's look more closely at the story.

Jesus is in the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. You probably remember that they were very good friends of Jesus - very good friends. Their's was a home he could drop into anytime, and be assured of some quiet, comfortable time with friends, food and fellowship. They were dear to Him, and He, most assuredly was dear to them.

There are at least three Gospel stories about their friendship - all pretty well-known. One was the day that Jesus came for dinner, and Martha was running around like a chicken with its head cut off trying to get things prepared and make things perfect for Jesus. While Mary, sat at Jesus' feet and listened to him. Remember that story? (Why, we had a whole Women's Retreat about it a couple of years ago!)

In that story, Martha comes whining to Jesus about Mary - about how she was doing all the work, and Mary was sitting there doing nothing. Do you remember what Jesus said to her? In a loving way, He told her to relax, to stop running around in circles. He told her that Mary understood what was important - not trying to be the perfect hostess, but sitting at the feet of Jesus.

A second Gospel story about this family and Jesus was when Lazarus, the brother, got very sick and died. They called for Jesus to come and help, but because He got delayed caring for others, it was too late, and when He finally got there, Lazarus had already died. The family was very unhappy with Him, and said to Him, “If you had been here, Lazarus would not have died.”

But, in the end, it didn't matter, because Jesus called Lazarus forth from death - and

indeed, he came to life again, right before their very eyes - an absolute, astounding miracle. The joy they knew, knew no bounds - and their gratitude to Jesus knew no bounds as well.

Now, today, the third Gospel story about this very special family. This happens late in the time of Jesus' earthly ministry. For several years, He has been wandering the roadways, hillsides and sea shores of Galilee - teaching, preaching, and healing. He's gathered a lot of followers, yes, but He's also gathered a lot of enemies who were threatened by Him - very, very threatened by Him.

On this particular day, it appears that He has stopped for a while to dine with those closest to Him. It sounds like it was like any other dinner at that house - the scripture says that Martha served (see, nothing has changed there), and Lazarus was one of the ones sitting with Jesus at the table. Pretty normal, huh?

Then something extraordinary happened - what I'm calling "the prodigal moment." All of a sudden, Mary gets up, goes to the cupboard, takes down a jar of very costly perfume made of pure nard, goes over to Jesus, kneels down in front of Him, takes the costly aromatic perfume and anoints His feet. Then she wipes them with her hair.

Now, you have to understand how upsetting that was to those who witnessed it, and why. For one thing, good, upstanding women never let down their hair in public - it just wasn't done - it was scandalous, alluring, loose, if you will. Mary not only let down her hair, but then she used it to wipe Jesus' feet.

A second thing that upset people was that she anointed his feet, not his head. After all, that's where anointing usually took place (as in the 23rd Psalm where we say, "He anointeth my head with oil"). What was she doing anointing his feet?

Finally, of course, what really upset them, and upset Judas the most, was what they perceived to be the absolute waste of this very valuable perfume, this nard. Judas steps right up and self-righteously asks the question about why it was wasted, when it could have been sold and the money be used for the poor.

None of it made any sense to the people who sat mostly in stunned silence after they have seen this "prodigal moment." But it made sense to Jesus, and it touched him deeply, so deeply that in another Gospel, He says "whenever the Gospel is told in the world, what she has done will be told in memory of her."

The anointing of Jesus by Mary was recklessly extravagant - it was a prodigal moment. It seems that in that moment, she could do no other. When common sense might have told her to think twice, instead she followed her heart.

And her heart was filled with love for this man - her Lord, her Master, her Friend. She had so many reasons to love Him. She knew who He was, and she was a happy and committed disciple. She knew He understood her like no other, and took up for her when others would put

her down. And she knew that He had brought her brother back to life, He had literally brought Lazarus back from the dead. Oh, how he had touched her. Oh, why wouldn't she want to pour out her love and admiration for him in this way?

Love compelled Mary to do it - to give to Jesus, to pour upon Jesus the most valuable thing she possessed - that costly, costly perfume.

That kind of love is contagious, and over the centuries since then, indeed, Mary has been remembered, her act of extravagant love has been remembered, just like Jesus had hoped, and extravagant acts of love, like her's, occur even today. I read about one this week.

“A doctor went on a mission trip one year to do surgery in the Gaza Strip. One day he stopped in a peasant hovel to see a woman on whom he had performed surgery. She and her husband were dirt poor. Their livestock supply consisted of one Angora rabbit and two chickens. For income, the woman combed the hair out of the rabbit, spun the hair into yard and sold it. For food, she and her husband ate the eggs from the chickens. The woman insisted that the missionary surgeon stay for lunch. He accepted the invitation and said he would be back for lunch after he had gone down the road to see another post-operative patient. An hour and a half later he was back. He peeked into the cooking pot to see what he was going to eat. He saw one rabbit and two chickens. The woman had given up her entire livestock supply - her income, her food, everything. As he told this story to some medical students years later, that doctor wept unashamedly, saying ‘we who have everything know nothing of gratitude’ - she gave her all out of grateful love for him.” (On-line, sermons.com)

Some would say that woman was recklessly extravagant, but she, like Mary, could do no other.

A second observation about Mary's action is that she seemed to have not cared less about what other people thought of what she did. It certainly didn't stop her - worrying about what others might think.

I know that sometimes stops us from doing extravagant or reckless things. We worry about what people will think, what they'll say, how they'll look at us, or treat us. They'll think we're wasteful, or stupid, or they'll question our motives. Mary didn't worry about any of that - she simply poured out her gift upon her Lord.

A while ago I heard about an incident in a church that caused no small amount of awkwardness and embarrassment. Apparently a little child came to church one day for the very first time in his life. His parents never went to church, nobody in his family had ever gone to church, he had just simply never had any exposure to it at all.

Every Sunday a church bus drove through his neighborhood picking people up for worship and Sunday School. He would see the bus but it didn't mean anything to him. The bus driver also saw him - every Sunday, and every Sunday wondered about him. Finally, one day, the bus driver left a little early for his pick-ups and stopped in front of this little boy's house.

He introduced himself to the little boy, telling him what church he was from, and they sat down together on the front stoop of the boy's house, and in a wonderful conversation with him, the bus driver told him about Jesus, and how much Jesus loved him more than anything, and that the greatest thing he could do was love Jesus back with everything he had. It was loving and tender and sweet, and when he was finished, he asked the little boy if he wanted to come to church that day. The little boy ran inside and checked with his parents who told him it was okay, and so that little boy got on the bus and was soon joined by a whole lot of other folks headed to worship.

Well, they got to the church and the man led the little boy inside and found him a seat in the pew, and then he went off to do some other duties. The boy just sat there wide-eyed taking it all in. It was all like Greek to him, of course. He had no idea what was going on, but it was fascinating.

Then came the time for the offering, although he had no idea what it was. All he saw was some men going up and down the aisles holding these golden plates, and when they went in front of people, they put money in them, lots and lots of money. He even saw some people put their hands in their pocket, pull out everything they had, and put it in the plate.

Suddenly, he felt awkward because he had nothing to put in the plate. Then it came to him. He remembered his conversation with that man on the front stoop of his house - how when you love Jesus you give yourself and everything you have to Him. So, do you know what he did? He went to one of the ushers, took an empty offering plate, sat it down in the aisle of the church, and stood in it. In his own sweet way, he was giving himself to Jesus - all of himself.

I'll bet there was some awkwardness when he did that. I'll bet people shuffled in their pews, and looked away, and some may have even chuckled or laughed at him. But it didn't matter - because love compelled him to give his all - literally. Love for Jesus has a way of doing that - just like it did for Mary, and this precious boy.

The last observation I want to make about this prodigal moment is that Mary didn't wait to act. She just did it right then, before it was too late. You see, Jesus said that Mary understood that the end was coming, and that, in anointing him, she acknowledged that His path would soon lead to death. And by pouring out that precious perfume, in a symbolic way, she was anointing those feet that soon would be walking the path to the cross.

While the others gathered there didn't want to think about what was to come, Mary didn't wait, she chose that moment to care for Jesus before His death, and He was ever so grateful for that. If there's one thing we can learn from Mary's story, it is: don't wait to pour out your love. Don't wait until it's too late!

So I want to close this morning by sharing another story of perfect timing - of not waiting to do something loving and good. It's something some of you may know about from the news or from accounts on Facebook, something that happened not long ago. I don't know a lot of the details, but I do know the essence of the story.

There is a high school basketball team somewhere in this country, who has an equipment manager who has Downs Syndrome. He has faithfully served that team, game in and game out for years. Everybody loves him and cares for him, and accepts him for who he is, limitations and all. He's as much a part of the team as any player.

Well, the last game of the season came along, and the coach decided to show this young man how much they cared about him, by letting him suit up for the game. He gave him a uniform just like the one worn by all the players. He was thrilled. Everybody in the stands was thrilled too - including the opposing players and their supporters in the stands.

When the clock was counting down, and the game was nearing its end, the coach did something incredible. He put this kid in the game. The crowd cheered wildly. Then for the next few minutes, every time their team got the ball they threw it to him, so that he could have a shot at the basket, but every time he missed, and the crowd would groan a little.

They kept it up and kept it up but sadly, he never made a basket. Finally, the seconds were few, and the ball had gone out of bounds, and the possession was now with the other team. So it looked like the fairy tale was over.

The opposing team's player stood on the out of bounds line and prepared to throw the ball into play, when all of a sudden he yelled out this kid's name - the equipment manager - a kid on the other team, remember? The boy turned and looked at him and the opposing team's player tossed the ball to him, and everybody yelled to him, "shoot the ball." And he turned, and shot the ball, and it went into the basket - and the place went nuts! Everybody celebrated, including the opposing team.

A prodigal moment - at just the right time - the last game of the season, the last seconds of the game - in a most amazing way, at the hands of the opposition.

Sometimes, friends, love compels you to do extravagant things, and when it does, do it. As the sermon title says, "give up caution," and just do it. Like Mary, and like the others I told you about today, listen to your heart when you feel compelled to be recklessly extravagant in your love or your giving, don't worry about what others will think or feel or say, and don't wait - just do it.

After all, wouldn't you want to be remembered like the prodigal in this week's story instead of the prodigal in last week's?

May it be so.