

“WILLING TO PAY THE PRICE: V – EXTRAVAGANT LOVE”

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Fifth Sunday of Lent

Colossians 3:12-17

John 12:1-8

The other day I came upon something on Facebook that reminded me that I'm getting older. It was one of those posts that asks you if you remember “thus and so” from when you were growing up – this time it was about “common courtesies” or “decorum.” So I scrolled through the screens and found myself nodding yes at every single one of them. I do remember being taught such things as:

- Say “please” and “thank you.”
- Send thank you notes.
- Hold the door open for others, and if someone holds the door open for you, thank them.
- When you cough, cover your mouth.
- When you're eating, don't put your elbows on the table, put your napkin in your lap, chew quietly, use your utensils, and don't talk with your mouth full.
- Don't interrupt, but if you must, say “Excuse me.”

These things sound familiar to you?

Here are a few more that I learned, which may be peculiar to children of teachers and/or music directors:

- Don't unwrap candy during a worship service or musical performance.
- Do not get up and leave your seat while a musical piece is being performed or a sermon is being preached. Wait until the piece or sermon is over, and then leave as quietly as possible – and don't come back in during a piece of music or a sermon.
- And most important of all, do not talk out loud during a concert or worship service.

Well, I could go on and on, but you get it, right? And sadly, you probably also get that it seems like people aren't following those things much anymore, right? For instance, how many of you have gone to a concert or performance at school, and seen parents, once their child has done his/her thing, get up and leave, right in the middle of someone else's moment? Or how many of you have shot dirty looks at

people having a discussion with one another during a concert or worship service? (Just an aside here – I remember being with my father at an outdoor concert at Bellevue State Park once and the people being us were talking away during the whole thing, when finally, exasperated, he turned around and told them that he had come to hear the concert, not them, and could they please stop talking!) I think I'd be kind of afraid to do that these days, but alas, it worked – they stopped talking!

Well friends, decorum used to loom larger in days gone by, and it especially loomed large in Biblical times. There were definite things that one should or should not do, depending on who you were, your gender, whether you were clergy or laity, royal or commoner. Everyone knew their place, and how they should act, and people pretty much stuck to that.

So it was, that on the night of the dinner which took place in today's Gospel lesson, when Mary knelt down before Jesus and anointed him, everyone there was in shock – decorum went flying out the window.

Let me give you a little background before we get to "the incident." The scripture says that Jesus came to Bethany to have dinner at the home of his dear friends – Lazarus, Mary and Martha. They were among his closest friends – oh, they knew him to be the Lord, but as one person so beautifully put it, "They were his friends, the three people in whose presence he could be a man as well as a messiah." (Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Prophet Mary," *Bread of Angels*, p. 57)

You need to remember that a short time before this, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. And while that thrilled everyone who loved him, it infuriated the religious authorities. The other things he had done – hanging out with sinners, healing on the Sabbath, talking with foreign women alone – had made them mad, but this, bringing someone back from death, sent them over the edge. One writer said that "By raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus has made it to the top of the religious right's 'most wanted' list." (Ibid)

So Jesus knows they are after him, he knows his days are numbered, and he needs to spend time with friends. So he goes to a house where he knows he will find rest, relaxation, a good meal and support – the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. He brings with him his disciples.

All is going according to plan, when at some point in the evening, Mary leaves the room and comes back bearing a jar of expensive perfume. She opens the jar and the fragrance of the pure nard permeates the room. You could tell just by smelling it that it was extremely precious stuff.

And then, it happened. Mary knelt down in front of Jesus, anointed his feet with the precious nard, then wiped his feet with her hair. She broke about every

rule of decorum there was. First of all, for a woman to loosen her hair, especially in a room filled with men, was something a respectable woman would never do. Loose hair pretty much marked a loose woman. Secondly, she anointed the feet of a man in public, which a woman would never do. If a man's feet were anointed, it was by another man. Thirdly, she touched Jesus – a single woman caressing the feet of a rabbi, which was never done. And finally, she wiped the nard off with her hair, which was also considered bold and highly inappropriate.

Suffice it to say that everyone there was in shock as they watched Mary. And I would imagine that there was probably a whole lot of gasps and deadly silence going on. Until someone spoke up in indignation and outrage – and that someone was named Judas.

He jumps all over her, and targets the waste of such a precious commodity. He tries to make it look like he's concerned about the poor, when he intimates she could care less about the poor. (The writer of the Gospel lets us in on the fact that there's more to his comments than meets the eye – he's a pretty greedy guy who likes to keep money for himself.)

Whatever the reason, when Judas jumps all over Mary, Jesus steps up and, in essence, jumps all over him, saying "Leave her alone!" Because you see, Jesus knew exactly what was going on, exactly why Mary had done what she did – she was preparing his body for what was soon to come, for his death.

The great preacher Barbara Brown Taylor likens Mary to the prophets of old, who did symbolic things to show what was to come. Like Jeremiah, who "ate the scroll of the Lord as a sign that he carried the word of God around inside of him, or Jeremiah, who smashed the clay jar to show God's judgement on Judah and Jerusalem. Prophets (she writes) do these things. They act out. They act out the truth that no one else can see, and those who stand around watching either write them off as crazy or fall silent before the disturbing news they see from God." (Ibid, p. 60)

Taylor says that at that moment Mary had a choice – she could have anointed him as King or anointed him for his burial – but she knew and he knew what was to come, so she anointed him for his impending death.

As sad as the reason for the anointing was, one thing is for sure, it was an act of extravagant love. Nothing could have been further from Mary's mind than the cost of that fragrant perfume, except for the fact that its tremendous value and worth showed her deep love and respect for him, who he was, and what he came to be and do.

Her extravagant act of love that day beautifully mirrored the extravagance of God's love in Christ, a love so deep for humankind that he sent his only begotten Son to live among us, a love so deep for a sinful humanity that that beloved Son died on the cross to bear the sins of the world – extravagant love.

Perhaps there was nothing more perfect that Mary could have done to show Jesus how precious he was, how his extravagant love had changed her life, and how she knew the price he would pay, willingly, for all of God's children.

Friends, it is interesting, but not surprising, that both Mary and Judas loom large in this Gospel story – because in their actions we see so clearly the choice we have in life – to love and give extravagantly, or to be selfish, self-serving and greedy; and to be loving and giving, or to be one who points out what others are doing wrong.

Mary, as the Apostle Paul would have said, chose “the more excellent way” – the way of love. I think her story invites us to do the same, to love with extravagance, mirroring the extravagant love God has shown to us.

It's a love that, for one, is willing to risk for what is right. Mary surely knew beforehand how people would be aghast at her gift to Jesus. She knew she would be breaking all the rules of decorum. But it was the right thing to do for the Jesus she loved, the Jesus who would die for her and for everyone, so she did it anyway, despite the cost.

Sometimes that's what extravagant love asks of us – to risk doing the right thing despite the cost, despite having people question your motives, or try to make you feel small. You know, I know this might seem controversial to say, but it made me sad to see people criticizing the young people who decided to take a stand this week against school violence. They were doing what they felt called to do, they were making a peaceful stand for a prescribed period of time – 17 minutes to remember the 17 lives lost in Parkland Florida – and yet they came under attack over and over again – for being young and foolish and not understanding the complexity of the issue. Well, they may not know the complexity of the issue, but they do know this – they don't want to go to school one day and never come home because of deadly violence there – so they broke decorum, if you will, for seventeen minutes the other day, even though it was risky.

A second thing that Mary's kind of extravagant love invites us to do is not be so concerned about the cost, to not hold on to something precious for a later date. I remember hearing about something the late writer Erma Bombeck wrote after she was diagnosed with cancer. It was called “If I Had to Live My Life Over.”

She wrote:

“... I would have burned the pink candle sculpted like a rose before it melted in storage. I would have talked less and listened more. I would have invited friends over to dinner even if the carpet was stained, or the sofa faded. I would have eaten the popcorn in the ‘good’ living room and worried much less about the dirt when someone wanted to light a fire in the fireplace. ... I would have sat on the lawn with my kids, even if it meant grass stains.”

Writer Tish Oxenreider, whose blog reminded me of Bombeck’s words, reflected on those words and she wrote these: Make this season of your life — whatever it is — more special with those special things you’re saving. Break out the good china for tonight’s homemade pizza. Let your kids know they’re special with those special little things, and don’t worry so much about the messes they’ll make. Bring out the “fancy guest” towels for your family. You’ll blink, and this season will be gone. That pudgy hand covered in dirt will soon be holding hands in a waltz with her groom. Enjoy the little things in life. And make them more special by using the good stuff. Don’t wait for that perfect moment — it’s right here. (On-line, Tish Oxenreider, “Use the Good Stuff,” *The Art of Simple*)

Friends, Mary knew it was the perfect moment to use the good stuff – that precious perfume. The cost didn’t matter – her love for Christ did, and her concern that he be anointed for what was to come took precedence, and she knelt down and offered her gift. May we use the gifts God puts in our lives and not hold on to them until later.

Finally, Mary’s extravagant love is a beautiful example of how loving acts live on for a long, long time. Centuries later we’re reading her story and are compelled to love as she loved. She had no idea that would happen, but as one commentary said, “The fragrance of love’s actions is carried on the wind to places we never see.” (*Feasting on the Word, Lent Year C, p. 143*)

I read a funny little story this week that shows just how true that is. There is a woman named Anna Smith, who began Charlotte Food Reserve, who one day, was hauling a station wagon full of donuts to a food shelter. She stopped off to make a pitch to executives of what is now Bank of America. As she rode the elevator to the top floor, someone said, “You smell like donuts!” She laughed and told him why, and by the time the door opened, she had recruited him to help with the food reserve. (*Ibid.*)

In that case, literally, the fragrance of love’s actions moved someone else to love, and so too, friends will the fragrance of the actions we show out of love for Christ. It will carry on the wind to places and people we never see. God will use what we give to touch hearts in ways we will never know. It’s like that proverbial pebble dropped in the water, the ripple effects go on and on – just like the ripple effects of Mary’s act of extravagant love to a dying Jesus so long ago.

Dear friends, God loves us with an extravagant love. It's a love that knows no bounds, that gave Jesus to us and for us, a love that walks with us and carries us when we can't carry ourselves. It is a love that calls for a response.

Will you respond by loving extravagantly yourself? Will you do the right thing and give, even if others might call you foolish? Will you not hold so tightly to things, that you miss the moment God might be calling you to use them? And will you love extravagantly knowing that what you do might call others to do the same thing with their lives?

Friends, may you and I go forth from this place today to lavish extravagant love on our hurting world, knowing that we do not go alone, for God himself, the God who gave most extravagantly of all, goes with us. May it be so.

Amen.