

“Meeting Christ in Our Everyday Lives:  
in Extravagant Love”  
John 12:1-8  
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Lake Forest, Illinois  
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*Introduction to Scripture:* We are about to read the story of Mary bathing Jesus’ feet in costly nard, and wiping them with her hair. This story cannot be told without remembering what precedes it, and what follows. Immediately before this lesson, Jesus has gone to Bethany, where his friend Lazarus has died. Lazarus, brother to Mary and Martha, was in the tomb four days before Jesus arrived. His sisters are grieving, and angry; why couldn’t Jesus have come sooner, and saved their brother, whom he loved, just as he had healed countless strangers on the way? But Jesus has a greater sign to show them: the sign that he is Lord even over death itself. After weeping with Mary and Martha, he goes to Lazarus’ tomb, and commands the dead man to arise. The raising of Lazarus from the dead is the last miracle he will perform before he goes to Jerusalem; and it is the action that finally prompts his enemies to vow to put him to death. After this, Jesus will go to Jerusalem, where he will be hung on the cross.

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There are a few stories that appear in all four gospels, and this is one of them. The details differ – the gospels weren’t modern news accounts, but testaments to Jesus. In Luke the woman is an unnamed sinner who comes to a Pharisee’s house when she finds out Jesus is visiting; the Pharisee objects to her gesture because of the woman’s sinfulness. In Matthew and Mark she’s an unnamed woman in Bethany who comes to Simon the tanner’s house; the objection comes from unnamed guests who are genuinely appalled that the money wasn’t given to the poor.

It’s important to know that the act of anointing wasn’t unusual or scandalous. Dean Thompson, President of Louisville Seminary, once reminded us at the Moveable Feast preaching group that anointing was an ancient practice that took place at weddings, when receiving special guests, at the ordination of priests, and at the installation of royalty (presented at the 2001 Moveable Feast). What’s scandalous in three of the four gospels is this: the enormous, obscene cost of the ointment, wasted on anointing Jesus, when it could have benefited the poor (and then, in one case, skimmed by Judas. Corruption is not new.).

Which leads to a couple of fair questions: Why does the woman do this? And aren't the objections reasonable?

Let's start with the question of motivation, and the assumptions we have about giving. Why does anyone give? Why do we give to Christ's church or give to any good cause? A colleague notes that "John D. Rockefeller once said that people give for two reasons: either because they believe the cause is a worthy one and will pay dividends in human betterment, or because a sense of duty impels them" (Ken Wells, preaching at Setauket Presbyterian Church, Setauket, NY, 10/19/86). Indeed, the ability to give is a cultural aspiration. An article last fall in the Science section of the New York Times suggests that "One of the most comforting visions of the American dream includes becoming not only rich, respected and glamorous, but also a soft touch: generous with time and money, a philanthropist-mensch, a nurturing prince or princess of industry." We want to be able to share; we aspire to be generous givers. And there's nothing wrong with that.

But there are counter-forces in us that short-circuit that desire. The Times article went on to cite an experiment run by Dr. Kathleen Vohs, a psychologist in the University of Minnesota school of management. "Everybody says that if they had the money, they'd give more away, they'd do what Warren Buffett did," Dr. Vohs said, referring to Buffett's \$30 billion donation to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. So they brought that idea to the lab to test it. First, they primed their subjects by having them unscramble jumbled phrases. One group was given random phrases about money, like "high-paying salary"; the other group's phrases did not discuss money. Then they had the subjects work on difficult puzzles and offered them help if they needed it. This is where it gets interesting. Those who had been thinking about money behaved differently than the other group: they took 70% longer to ask for help; they distanced themselves from others – literally, setting their chairs much farther apart from other students; they were "twice as slow to help a confused student ... and about twice as cheap when asked to donate to help needy students."

Interestingly, the background of the subjects didn't affect their responses. "Daughters of high-end bankers behaved just like the sons of plumbers," Dr. Vohs says, "and none of them realized the studies were about money." What are we to make of this? George Lowenstein, professor of economics and psychology at Carnegie Mellon, assesses the results this way: "We know there is a civilizing side to money, that people acting in a self-interested fashion depend on fellow humans in a community and tend to treat them fairly. But this study shows its pernicious side, how the pursuit of money can be isolating" (Benedict Carey, "Just Thinking About Money Can Turn the Mind Stingy," *The New York*, 11/21/06, page D6).

Isolating, and tight. Which makes me wonder whether if push came to shove, the other disciples really would have spent the 300 denarii on the poor, or if they too would feel compelled to skim a bit, as Judas did.

But let's give them the benefit of the doubt. What if they're sincere about their objection ... what if they were genuinely appalled that this money didn't go to the poor? They have a point. Using John D. Rockefeller's criteria, there is no worthy cause here, no dividends in human betterment. Even Mary herself receives "no goods or services for contributions rendered."

So why does she do it? Why does Mary spend the nard extravagantly, absurdly? Simply because there are times when it is right to spill a liter of nard, in gratitude for what the Lord has done, in gratitude for what the Lord is about to do. Jesus has raised her brother Lazarus from the dead; he has given Mary her brother's life back. And Jesus is about to do even more: he is about to go to Jerusalem, to give his own life for the sake of all of us, that we may get our lives back, literally, from death itself, and also from the thousand deaths, of stinginess and isolation and anxiety and defeat, of all the things that claim us. That is why she pours herself out for him. Because he has poured himself out for her; she knows that he has given her her life back.

And this is the crux of how her action matters to us. For all the good that the mainline church has done over the years, establishing hospitals, founding colleges, supporting settlement houses, and reaching out to the poor in countless ways ... for all the enormous good that the mainline church has done, perhaps we have made one key and central error. I have come to believe that the failure of the mainline is this: our good works replaced the adoration of our one true God. Don't get me wrong. Serving is crucial; generosity to the poor is essential; faith without works is dead. But there is still one thing more important even than serving, only one thing more important than giving to the poor; one thing more important than all the good works in the world: pouring ourselves out in adoration to our Lord.

I love the way Peter Keller put it when he reflected on this passage. He asked, "If Jesus came to your home for dinner, what bottle of wine would you reach for?" Honestly, that's what genuine stewardship is about. Not raising money for the church's annual budget. Genuine stewardship is about reaching for our best, our very best, and pouring it out for the Lord. Frankly, that's why it bothers me that some people who can afford much, much more give only \$10 or \$20/week, or keep their pledges flat from year to year, even if their income grows, or don't even pledge at all. The problem isn't that we can't make a *budget*, for goodness sake. The problem is that we don't understand stewardship as fundamentally an act of adoration, of gratitude, of worship.

I'm drawn to another observation from the legacy of giving by the Rockefellers. My former colleague Beth Merrill Neel once noted that "Riverside church in NYC was built to resemble the great Gothic cathedral in Chartres, and was built largely because of the largess of the John D. Rockefeller, Jr. family in the 1920s. ... The Rockefellers being Rockefellers, they got to decide who would be the first pastor to occupy the pulpit in that grand building. From that day forward, those serving as pastor of that church have always had an interesting time walking what is often the fine line between acknowledging their rich patrons and proclaiming the word of God" – a line that all of us who serve in well-to-do areas, frankly. Beth goes on to say that "Ernest Campbell served as pastor of Riverside from 1968 till 1976, and he too walked

that fine line, not only for the sake of the congregation, but for his own conscience as well. He tells the story of his own struggle with stewardship, how for a long time the question he asked himself was, ‘How little can I give and still be thought respectable?’ But then one of his elders changed his perspective. This man, of no particular importance, not only gave, he gave with joy and he gave for the most part anonymously. After getting to know him, the stewardship question for Campbell changed. Now he asks himself, ‘How much dare I keep for myself and still keep faith with God?’” (“Godly Treasure,” preached 11/14/04 at Community Presbyterian Church, Clarendon Hills, Illinois).

How much dare I keep for myself and still keep faith with God? One former Moderator, wise sage Doug Oldenburg, says it this way: it’s a matter of “giving up something you love for something you love more” (at a PC(USA) conference on stewardship, Portland, Oregon, 1996). And writer Kathleen Norris says it best of all:

“Maybe monks and poets know, as Jesus did, when a friend, in an extravagant, loving gesture, bathed his feet in nard, an expensive fragrant oil, and wiped them with her hair, that the symbolic act matters; that those who know the exact price of things, as Judas did, often don’t know the true cost or value of anything” (Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (NY: Riverhead, 1996), p. 147, cited in Dean Thompson’s 2001 paper for the Moveable Feast. Thompson currently serves as President of Louisville Theological Seminary.).

Why do we give? What motivates us? And what matters most to us, that we would give ourselves for, not out of joyless duty, not for the sake of good causes, not to receive acclamation or reward? It is counter-cultural, counter even to our deepest hard-wiring, to open our hands without counting the cost. But maybe it’s only when we don’t count the cost that we finally can give. Maybe, as that psychological study says, it’s only when we don’t think about money ... when we focus altogether on a different idea ... when we try to unravel a different puzzle that we can finally give. And is there any greater puzzle to unravel than this: that Jesus poured himself out for us, dying even on the cross, so that we might really live.

This, in the end, is where we all come to meet Jesus: in his love poured out for us, his extravagant love, love without price, love without measure. The hymn we are about to sing is “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.” It is one of my favorites. May its closing verse be all our prayer:

*“Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
that were a present far too small.  
Love so amazing, so divine  
demands my soul, my life, my all.” Amen.*