

“The Extravagant Gift”
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John 12:1-8
San Dimas Community Church
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We’re inching our way closer to Holy Week and all that means to us as Christian people. The text for today tells the story of perhaps one of the last evenings Jesus’ spends with his closest friends. They were like family to him. We find Jesus in the home of Mary, Martha, and their brother, Lazarus, who just a chapter earlier, Jesus has raised from the dead.

John’s gospel simply states “Martha served.” There’s no discussion of which sister is doing the more noble thing like we read about in the other gospels. Martha offers the traditional hospitality which was woven into the fabric of life in ancient times. On the otherhand, Mary is being attentive to Jesus in her own way. Perhaps these closest of Jesus’ friends sense that he is wearied from his preaching and needs some tender loving care. Perhaps they intuit that the days to come will not be so kind to their dear friend. It’s a beautiful picture of the support of friends in a time of need.

It is within this context that Jesus shows us that he knows there’s a time and a place to let others take care of us. Jesus doesn’t have to be the strong one all the time. He honors others by letting them give to him. He’s not above letting someone wash his feet and massage them with perfumed ointment.

But there’s always the choir of critics and in this story it’s Judas, who has to butt in and criticize what’s going on. Judas protests: “Why does Mary waste this ointment on your feet Jesus? Didn’t she listen to Jesus preach about taking care of the poor and needy? If she’d really been paying attention to you, Jesus, she would have sold this ointment and fed a lot of hungry people.” Sounds like Judas really cares about poor people. But the story tells us that Judas has his own motives and they’re not noble at all. In fact, they are self-serving. Jesus sees right through Judas and what he sees is a heart that is stone cold. Instead of reacting to Judas’ righteous indignation, Jesus focuses on Mary’s gift, and tells Judas to let her be.

This scripture hints about what’s coming down. Jesus says this ointment was bought for his burial and that he’s not long for this world.

As we in the year 2007 move on towards Holy Week, what lesson might we hear in this text? One lesson might be to test motives by comparing what is said with what one does. Jesus knew Judas’ motives because in spite of saying the right words, he stole money from the common purse to use for his own purposes. Judas’ heart did not match his words or his deeds.

Another important lesson is that sometimes we need to let others take care of us. To allow someone to “wash our feet” either literally or figurately is humbling. This is hard for most of us to do. It strikes at our core of wanting to be independent. But there comes a time when to refuse the care of someone who loves us is just another form of pride. Jesus models for us a willingness to be cared for as well as to care. God made us to need each other. There’s nothing weak about recognizing that relationships are mutual and that sometimes we are on the receiving end. Jesus trusted his friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus and that evening, he allowed them to care for him.

Another lesson from this story is just what are we to do with the choir of critics who most of the time are the voices in our heads, who like the voice of Judas, always has a word to say and

that word is usually “should.” “You should be doing more. You should be better or different.” Jesus silences the choir of critics and accepts Mary’s extravagant gift.

But what did Mary’s extravagant gift symbolize? What happened that day is so important that all four gospels write about it with some differences. Yet in all four gospels we see a woman overcome with gratitude, overcome by joy because of what Jesus has meant in her life. She can’t contain or control her emotions because Jesus has touched her and changed her life forever. She’s a new woman! And no one, not even Judas, is going to take that away from her.

Like our sister Mary, Jesus has changed our lives forever. Some of us have experienced dramatic moments of conversion that we can point to--a particular time and place. But for others of us, change has come a little at a time, and usually we are converted over and over, because that’s just human nature. The degree of our gratitude is often in direct proportion to the depth of our need.

If we read this text side by side with the text from Isaiah, we are reminded that overflowing gratitude is often the result of being led through the desert to a new place. The Christian life is not an easy road; it’s a trek in the wilderness. From our perspective it’s difficult to get the impact of what this text implies. The wilderness in ancient times pretty much meant death. It was not like going to Joshua tree for a day of mountain climbing. It was more like climbing Mt. Everest without oxygen.

The wilderness is a place to avoid! But in this beautiful passage Isaiah reminds us that even in the wilderness, God is “about to do a new thing... I will make a way in the wilderness and streams in the desert.”

Some translations say rivers in the desert. Others say streams. But the Hebrew word has the meaning of a small thread of water; just barely enough. So while we journey through the difficult and barren wilderness of our souls, this trickling stream of water reminds us that God is still with us and will give us what we need to keep on keeping on even in the most difficult of circumstances.

And then, when we find ourselves on the other side of the desert, in a place of new and abundant life and blessing, our hearts are so grateful that we do crazy things--like Mary did. We give all that we are and have and ever will be to the service of our God. We cry with tears of joy. We are changed people and life will never again be the same.

And then we do one more thing--we offer this extravagant gift of God’s love to others. It is an extravagant welcome--arms wide open. We tell the world that God has no litmus test to belong. We don’t judge anyone by their ability to pay dues, perform tasks, or even live their lives in ways called “acceptable” by society. We offer an extravagant welcome to anyone who wants to join us in the journey.

We say “welcome” to those who look like us and those who don’t. We say welcome to those who can pay and those who can’t. We say welcome to those who appear to “have it together” and all of us who are sometimes “messed up.” We say welcome to those who wouldn’t find the welcome sign out for them any other place. We say welcome to the children and welcome to the old folks and welcome to all those in between.

We say welcome because the joy in our hearts cannot be contained; it overflows. Our gratitude demands that we open our hearts, our doors, and our church to others. God has done great things for us; and so we offer the most extravagant gift we have both to God and to others. It is a gift of welcome, a gift of love, a gift of joy. May offering this extravagant gift to God be our mission in all the days to come.