

Sunday, April 7, 2019
Fifth Sunday in Lent (Year C)
John 12.1-8
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

There's nothing like a little drama at a dinner party. Mary is in the middle of performing an act of generosity and love, pouring perfume on Jesus' feet and wiping them with her hair. Not your everyday dinner party activity. But then again, this is no ordinary dinner party. This party is a celebration of the fact that Lazarus has been raised from the dead by Jesus. And Mary's actions are her way of expressing to Jesus her love and gratitude for giving her brother back to her and her sister Martha. Not only that, what we know, but the rest of the party-goers do not, is that this will be the last dinner party Jesus attends. The next day, Jesus will leave the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, and walk from Bethany, down the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron Valley, and make his final, triumphal entry into Jerusalem. And by week's end, he will be arrested, put on trial, found guilty of blasphemy, and put to death. So, whether she knew it or not, Mary was foreshadowing that moment the following week, when Jesus' lifeless body would be taken from the cross, and prepared for burial by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, before being placed in the tomb.

In the midst of this tender moment that somehow transcends time and space, Judas goes and pops off with "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (Jn 12.5). Way to ruin the moment, Judas.

You have to admit, though, Judas does have a point. Putting aside what the Gospel tells us about Judas being a thief who only wants the money for the perfume so he can skim off a portion for his own use, 300 hundred denarii is a lot of money down the drain. Three hundred denarii was the equivalent of a year's wages for the average worker. To put that in perspective, it amounts to something like \$22,000 at the current minimum wage. No wonder Judas was appalled. He could have skimmed a tidy little sum off of that pot of money. Not concerned with the amount being argued over, Jesus defends Mary's actions, pointing out that there will always be opportunities to serve the poor, but that he will not always be with them. Yeah, true. But to waste \$22,000?

Jesus feels that given the circumstances, Mary is justified in her actions—in her excess. Not that she doesn't care about the poor; not because the poor are not important; but because she is expressing her profound love and gratitude for Jesus. Mary is modeling gratitude. Gratitude for raising her brother from the dead. And, in a strange anticipatory way, gratitude for the actions Jesus will undergo in a week's time—his death and resurrection, which leads to forgiveness and new life for Mary and for all of us.

When you think about it, why shouldn't Mary express her love and gratitude for Jesus—for God—in an incredibly extravagant way. After all, look at all that God has done for his people. For starters, he created all of this—the entire world, just for us. Throughout Scripture, we hear of the many ways God cared for his people. Feeding the Israelites in the wilderness with manna

from heaven. Feeding 5,000 people on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, with a mere five loaves of bread and two fish, with a lot left over. At the wedding at Cana, turning something like 180 gallons of water into wine—not only a massive amount of wine, but also it was the really good, top-shelf stuff. Healing numerous people with just a word or a touch. Raising Lazarus from the dead, which was certainly an extraordinary event. Just to name a few of the acts of extravagance performed by God. All of these acts of kindness, acts of caring. But none of them ordinary. All of them over-the-top in terms of what is provided—in terms of quantity and in terms of quality.

And then the greatest, most extravagant gift of all was that God gave us his Son. The act of God coming among us in the flesh to be with us, out of love for us. So that we might experience his love face-to-face, flesh-to-flesh. But not just that. Consider what we are about to commemorate in just one week. That Jesus, God-in-the-flesh, gave himself up to the most horrific torture and death ever devised by humanity. Gave himself for us. So that through his death, sin and death itself would be destroyed. And having defeated sin and death through his resurrection, Jesus extended the gift of forgiveness and of eternal life to all of us.

So, given all of that extravagance on the part of God, on the part of Jesus, what's a few hundred denarii, a few thousand dollars, of perfume? But if anything, the actions of Mary in her extravagant display of love and gratitude are not meant to be a one-off situation. Rather, Mary's actions are meant to model what should be the norm of our own attitudes and behaviors.

That being the case, the question then becomes: how do we accomplish this level of extravagant love and gratitude in our own lives—in our own actions? We don't have Jesus here, physically present to receive whatever actions we may perform. To receive whatever signs of devotion and gratitude that we may wish to bestow. How do we express our gratitude to Christ and to God for all that we have received—for our life, for the world, for all that we have, for all that we have experienced? And just how do we express our gratitude for the most precious gifts we have received from Christ—the gifts we remember and celebrate during the Lenten season, during Holy Week, and particularly at Easter? The gifts of forgiveness, of redemption, of new and eternal life.

Quite simply, as the adage goes, we pay it forward. We express our gratitude by sharing that extravagance with others. We are all members of the same family, the human family, with Christ as the head of that family. And as Jesus reminds us, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Mt 25.40). So what better way to show our gratitude for all Jesus has done for us than by demonstrating that gratitude, by sharing our love, with others? To give of ourselves as Jesus gave of himself for us. And to do so as abundantly as he did. To do so as extravagantly as we possibly can.

As those who follow Jesus, as those who are the Body of Christ, we are called to be extravagant, just as he was in his actions toward others. Just as Mary was toward him. We are called to be extravagant with our love, with our kindness, with our compassion, with our time, with our treasure, with our talents, with our mercy, with our forgiveness, with our gratitude. For when

we are extravagant in the giving of ourselves in our actions toward others, we are not just bestowing our extravagance on them. We are also bestowing our extravagance on Christ. We are bestowing our extravagance on God.

Jesus ends his “argument” with Judas by saying “you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me” (Jn 12.8). While this is certainly a statement that there will always be opportunities to care for the poor, another, deeper meaning of Jesus’ statement is a message of urgency. That Mary needed to take that opportunity then and there, to express her extravagant love and gratitude for Jesus because he was going to be gone in just a week’s time. That for Mary, time was of the essence. That for Jesus, time was of the essence.

And so it is for us. Time IS of the essence. We don’t know what tomorrow will bring. So we need to seize the opportunity here and now, rather than kick the can down the road. Because if we don’t, it may be too late. Now is the time to share of yourself. As Mary did. As Jesus did.

So be extravagant. Be extravagant with your love. Be extravagant with your kindness. Be extravagant with your compassion. Be extravagant with your time. Be extravagant with your treasure. Be extravagant with your talents. Be extravagant with your mercy. Be extravagant with your forgiveness. Be extravagant with your gratitude. Be extravagant with yourselves and all that you are and all that you have to offer to others and to God. But whatever you do, don’t hesitate. Be extravagant now. Be extravagant as often as you can.

In so doing, you are living into the “prize of the heavenly calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4.14) that is only made possible, is only made real, through the extravagant gift of new life borne out of the pain and sorrow of Holy Week and extravagantly expressed through the joy and glory of Easter.