

“An Act of Love”

A member of the church, whom you know is in a financially precarious situation, has received a large amount of money from a relative. She knows that the church has been planning a big project to refurbish and beautify the sanctuary, put in a new sound system, and redo the pulpit area with a stage in order to bring in more music and worship options. This project has been approved by church council but not all the capital funds needed to start it have been received. She approaches you, as members of the trustees, to give you the remaining money needed for the project. She does not ask for any recognition for her or her family. Half of you are elated and are ready to receive the gift joyfully. The other half are worried that the woman is making her own financial situation worse by not keeping at least some of the money for herself.

You may wonder why I am bringing this up in a sermon which comes from a situation that happened some 2000 years ago. It's because the ethical and moral questions are the same. Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus, while at meal for Jesus at her family's home in Bethany, anoints the feet of Jesus with a very expensive perfume---the equivalent of a year's wages for an average worker---and then wipes his feet with her hair. Judas Iscariot, who will soon betray Jesus, criticizes Mary's action as an unnecessary waste of what could have been put to better use by the feeding of the poor. Judas' argument appears pragmatic and correct, yet Jesus reprimands him and supports Mary's action. How can this be, from the man who promotes economic justice and help to the poor?

Let us put Mary's actions in context of the historical setting. This meal, which professor A.J. Levinson of Vanderbilt School of Divinity says should be called the first supper, takes place just before the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. Martha is the practical sister, who cooks and serves the others. Present is Lazarus, whom Jesus has recently raised from the dead. The chief priest and the Pharisees have brought a death sentence against Jesus because of his raising Lazarus from the dead. In supporting Mary, Jesus tells all those present that Mary has anointed him in preparation for burial. Jesus then points out that he will not always be with those present. It is a harsh reminder of his earlier statements to his disciples that he must suffer and be put to death.

The overwhelming fragrance of the perfume is symbolic. The stench of death which once lingered over the house due to Lazarus' death has been replaced by the fragrance of love and devotion.

The protest in John's gospel about the cost of the perfume comes from Judas, which links the anointing to the farewell meal where Judas will leave and betray Jesus. Judas' complaint, which might normally be valid, is put in context by Judas' subsequent betrayal. The text puts Judas in a bad light, with good reason. He is actually a thief. He was the keeper of the common purse and wants the money for himself. When he is labeled a thief, the same word used to describe him is used to describe one who threatens the flock. He really does not care about the poor. When he betrays Jesus, he also betrays the sheep. He is the model of unfaithfulness.

What we learn from this passage is that faithfulness, not the amount of the gift, whether too large or too small, is the key to whether one is obeying God's will. Mary is the model of faithful discipleship. Her act reminds the disciples of the limited time of Jesus' presence among them, and the urgency to respond to Jesus while he is still here. Jesus is not indifferent to helping the poor; his point is that it will always be possible to serve the poor. We must respond to Jesus now and not wait.

Mary's act foretells Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet in John 13:1-20. Jesus does this as an act of love; the disciples are to repeat this act for each other as a show of love. In Mary, the reader is given a picture of the fullness of a life of discipleship. Her act shows forth the love that will be the hallmark of discipleship. Mary does this act on her own. She fulfills the commandment to love all even before Jesus teaches it. She gives boldly of herself and fully.

What does this act of extravagance mean to us today? We rightly admire Mary's love and generosity, particularly since Jesus himself praises her. But the truth is that quite often we are more like Martha or even like Judas. In the midst of a pragmatic society, we wish to be efficient, to make certain that everything counts and that there is no waste. In the church we look for responsible budgets that make the best possible use of every cent. This is a requirement of responsible stewardship. However, for this to be true Christian

stewardship it must be founded not primarily on efficiency but on an overwhelming love that leads to what others may consider mere waste.

We are preparing to celebrate Easter and the events surrounding it. There are many things which might keep us from celebrating anything. The opioid crisis in American continues to take lives and destroy families. Even while the stock market rises, there are many homeless and those without adequate care. Politics have become a cutthroat game in which the purpose is not to serve the needs of as many as possible but to amass as much power as one can while excluding those seen as “others.”

How can we celebrate in the midst of such circumstances, asks Justo Gonzales of Candler School of Theology? How can we spend resources and energy preparing choirs to perform beautiful music, embellishing our church buildings, buying Easter lilies, sending greetings to others, and spending money on Easter? Some of these expensive items can be justified on pure pragmatism. If the church looks good and has beautiful music, then perhaps more people will come and offerings will rise. All this may be true. It may even be proper. But this is not the reason for our joyful celebrations and extravagant actions.

The true justification is at another level. Mary spills her perfume with wild abandon for no other reason than this: Jesus is there. There is no calculation here, no consideration for efficiency, no sense that this is a waste. There is nothing but sheer love and gratitude of what Jesus has done.

So, when we consider the gift from the church member, instead of using pragmatism as our guiding light, maybe we should look at it in terms that she wants to show her overwhelming love and gratitude for what Jesus has done. Maybe that is the appropriate way to view this gift. Let us remember that Mary’s anointing illustrates the vision of the new life to be lived by those who embrace Jesus’ life and death and become children of God.

This does not mean that the poor are not important. On the contrary, Jesus establishes a parallel between himself and the poor. Now he is present, and Mary rightly feels the need to be extravagant. When he is no longer present

in the flesh, the poor will still be there---to be served with the same
extravagance.