

Extravagant Devotion

Matthew 26:6-13

We're not always so good showing extravagant devotion, extravagant love. We tend to be restrained, traditional, typical, measured. We show faithfulness, we show commitment, we show responsibility, reliability, even some affection. And all those things are good, both in relationship to one another and in relationship to God. Those are all good things. But there is something more shown to us in our text this afternoon. Not just the security of a faithful love shown to Jesus, but the extravagant devotion of a woman. I could even describe it as recklessly impulsive, using those words in a completely positive context.

It is not surprising that a woman is the one showing this devotion, as we might observe that women are more naturally disposed to such outward displays of love, and again, I say that as a very good thing. There is, of course, no hint whatsoever of romantic affection in our text, but love of a far deeper kind. Spiritual love for Christ by a godly woman, love that stands out for it's incredible, incomparable extravagance. And so as we might sheepishly confess our relatively infrequent displays of reckless romantic affection, let all of us be willing to consider and confess the sinfulness of the coldness of our hearts in the failure to demonstrate our love for Jesus in appropriately lavish and extraordinary demonstrations of devotion.

The woman is not identified for us in Matthew's gospel, but in John's gospel, John 12, a similar account is given of Jesus being anointed by Mary, the sister of Lazarus. We're told that was six days before the passover, and while Matthew noted in verse 2 of our text that it was only two days until the Passover, verse 6 is another section in Matthew's writing and he could well have been referring to something that had happened 4 days earlier. In other

words, it could be the same event, or it could be that there were two anointing both very similar with similar importance. I tend to think both accounts refer to a single instance, but that doesn't affect our understanding of this passage in Matthew 26, where Mary is not mentioned by name. But what is emphasized, in both gospels is,

I. A DISPLAY OF EXTRAVAGANT DEVOTION.

And the immediate impression of this act of devotion upon our own hearts is to consider and confess the sinfulness of the coldness of our hearts in the frequent failure to demonstrate our love for Jesus in appropriately lavish and extraordinary demonstrations of devotion. There is a lot of oil being poured out here. Mark's gospel tells us that this "woman came having an alabaster flask of very costly oil of spikenard." And that "it might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii." John's gospel records,

John 12:3 "Then Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil."

The details are so very striking. There was a lot of ointment. A pound. It was very costly. Pure nard, or spikenard, an aromatic herb grown in the high pasture land of the Himalayas, between Tibet and India. It was grown, and procured, in a very remote region, carried on camel-back through miles and miles of mountain-passes, and very high priced. There was no substitute. No imitation. No generic brand.

Mary had a whole jar, according to John's gospel; worth, at least in Judas' estimation, three hundred denarii. Considering a denarius to be approximately a day's wage, you can figure this total to be comparable to a full year's salary today. A full year's salary worth of perfume, used to anoint our Lord.

She broke the flask and poured it on his head, with such abundance that it flowed over his whole body--head, neck and shoulders, even the feet. A pound of ointment is a large quantity! And she emptied the whole bottle. The whole house was filled with the fragrance of the oil. Why? What is the motivation for this seemingly wasteful and reckless act? And in Mary's case, why wasn't she serving the food at the table like her sister Martha?

Clearly, clearly, Jesus honors this woman without reservation, so we know therefore that what she did was a good thing. And you can explain this good thing best by emphasizing the devotion of her heart, devotion to Jesus.

A. The devotion of unrestrained love.

Again, my point at the outset, of how own our love is anything but unrestrained. We are, instead, quite restrained. Maybe even just to the point of doing your duty. Maybe your devotion to God is limited to that which you are explicitly required, little more. This example, these words, speak to that very situation. The point of this event is, in fact, this nature of unrestrained extravagance. And with that, we shouldn't ignore, is,

B. The devotion of humble service.

Again, it's not surprising that Jesus is recognizing and honoring a woman here, as such humble service is often more clearly demonstrated by women, to their honor and credit. Such humble service became a way to identify godliness in older women, as Paul writes in,

1 Tim.5:9 "Do not let a widow under sixty years old be taken into the number, and not unless she has been the wife of one man, 10 well reported for good works: if she has brought up children, if she has lodged strangers, if she has washed the saints' feet, if she has relieved the afflicted, if she has diligently followed every good work."

Surely, with this woman's extravagant devotion to Jesus, we can praise her for such humble service. John's account of Mary's anointing includes that washing of Jesus' feet. She not only poured out this whole flask of precious oil, but then she wiped off Jesus' feet with her own hair. Such an act was in complete disregard of Oriental rules of propriety, which viewed with definite disfavor the action of a woman to loosen her hair in the presence of men. Mary not only unbinds her hair but even worse, from the perspective of the Oriental culture, uses her hair to wipe his feet. She is not thinking at all about cultural propriety and therefore not about her own reputation. She thinks only of Christ. And with such an abundance of oil that it required drying, she dries it up.

Now, in the countries of the middle east, where it is very hot, and where feet are often exposed to the heat by the use of open sandals, the feet would obviously become vulnerable to suffer much from dryness and scorching. And it would often be the responsibility of a woman, but more commonly a slave, to wash the feet of houseguests. It was a very menial task, and one which came to define humble service. And Jesus himself displays that very thing when he performed that menial duty for his disciples,

John 13:3 "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, 4 rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. 5 After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded."

Jesus' then responded to his disciples with these words,

John 13:12 "So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? 13 You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. 14 If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's

feet. 15 For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. 16 Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. 17 If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.”

Please feel the effect of this example of unrestrained love and humble service in your own heart. It would be foolish to think the application of this is that we should have incense and expensive fragrant oils as part of our worship service, for the whole sense here is the devotion of the heart. There is no warrant here for utilizing such outward elements of worship simply because they are expensive. It’s not just that we spend money on Jesus. But rather that our whole heart, and therefore our whole life, is devoted to him. That could, and would, honestly say, “For me, to live is Christ.”

There are times when that will mean great financial commitment, beginning, of course, with the cheerful giving of your tithes, to say nothing of your time and energy. But what really matters, is the devotion of the heart, the extravagant. Notice, then, the contrast.

II. THE PRETENSE OF SELF-RIGHTEOUS DEVOTION.

v.8-9

Perhaps the objection had some validity, on the surface. It cost too much money. Shouldn’t we be taking care of the poor? Isn’t it a waste to spend such a great amount of money on a one-time act of anointing when we could by food to keep the poor alive?

On the surface, those might seem to be legitimate questions. But what is explicit in our text is that his disciples got mad! They

were indignant! And it is most certainly,

A. The indignation of being upstaged.

Their position of importance was violated, by this woman! None of them did anything to show Jesus their devotion, but she did! And we are simply told that they were indignant! And the pretense of their devotion to Jesus became evident by what they said, which revealed,

B. The self-serving hypocrisy of claiming concern for others.

There is little doubt regarding that hypocrisy in, v.9

But under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, John’s gospel leaves no doubt about what lies under the surface of that question when asked by Judas Iscariot.

John 12:6 “This he said, not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the money box; and he used to take what was put in it.”

Apparently, at the time, nobody knew that Judas was stealing from the apostolic treasury, though it obviously became common knowledge after his death. John’s point is clear and pointed! Judas was a hypocrite. Uncomfortable at the genuine devotion of this godly woman, he pretends to be concerned with the poor, but that concern is only a thin veil for his own greed. He really wanted the perfume sold so that he could embezzle the money for himself.

Self-serving hypocrisy. A pretense of caring for the poor as an excuse for the failure to demonstrate an unstrained love for Jesus. There is a lot there to challenge and encourage us today. A lot there to stimulate your own self-examination and self-

awareness, lest your acts of devotion become a mere pretense as well. This godly woman is to be our example, her extravagant devotion to Jesus. And it is she who receives from Jesus...

III. THE REWARD OF HONOR.

v.10

Why such praise? Two reasons particularly are given here. First, praise for her,

A. Proper priorities.

v.11

There are ordinary events and special events, and this anointing falls in the category of special. This was not a sacrament that Jesus institutes for the on-going life of the church to practice, as he did with the Lord's Supper and Baptism. This is a unique act specific to unique circumstances. Jesus speaks of those on-going circumstances when he says, "The poor you have with you always."

Now there is nothing derogatory in that, nothing lacking in compassion nor insensitive, though people today might take it that way. Just a way to say, that in ordinary life, there will always be occasions to care for the needs of the poor. And you ought to, as the Scripture does make clear.

But at this point in history, something extraordinary is about to happen. Something that had never happened before, and would never happen again. Something which was at the very heart and center of God's eternal and unchangeable decrees. His eternal purpose, that in the fullness of time, Jesus would lay down his life as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of his people. And this was the fullness of time.

Therefore, the priority is upon Jesus. And it must always be so. There are many things which fall into the normal, ordinary, usual and customary affairs of life. Many good things, things you ought to be doing and things that ought to demand your time and attention. But then there are things of higher priority. And the worship of God is that higher priority.

It is good to care for the needs of others! Indeed, it is your calling as a Christian. Beginning with your own family. And certainly including the needs of the poor. But there is a higher priority, and here is where the so-called social gospel has so seriously erred. The highest priority is not merely social ministry to people in need. The church ought to be involved in such things, but not as their primary focus. Instead, the worship of God is the primary focus, made so obvious by Jesus' words. You always have opportunity to care for the poor. You do not always have immediate opportunity to worship me.

So Jesus says, when you have opportunity to worship me, take advantage of it! For this woman, that meant displaying the devotion of her love in a physical tangible way, anointing the physical body of Jesus while he still lived. For us, who now worship in spirit and in truth, that means that our worship is to be our priority. And there are occasions, particularly in the freedom of the sabbath day, to put aside the ordinary responsibilities of life in order to delight in the Lord. And that is really the intent and design of the sabbath day, to set aside time each week to have the opportunity to demonstrate proper priorities, following Mary's example. To set aside the ordinary, for that which is sacred.

Even in human relationships, extraordinary occasions are very useful, occasions like birthdays and anniversaries, and mother's day! Some things go beyond the ordinary existence of life. The extravagance which reflects the devotion of your heart ought to

be the value of any gift that you give. How much more so in our relationship with God. Along with that is the valuable recognition of a...

B. Timely service.

v.12

Now, it's not that Jesus encourages this woman to keep the fragrant oil for his burial, for she poured it all out already. Rather, Jesus is himself predicting his own death and burial, and though she might not have been fully aware of the connection, he says that her anointing is an act of preparation for burial.

Now, normally, a body would be anointed prior to being put in the tomb, prepared for burial. That was a very important custom. Perhaps this woman had the oil for the purpose of anointing Jesus' dead body, itself an act of love. But in the opportunity she had to be in his presence, she realized that it might be now or never. So, rather than waiting for Jesus to die and then to pour the oil on his body, not knowing if she would even have that opportunity, she poured the oil on Jesus in person, alive, as he visited in her own home.

It was timely service, demonstrating love to Jesus while he was still alive. In Mark 14, Jesus says,

Mark 14:8 "She has done what she could. She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial."

Because of this, because of the impending death and burial of Jesus, this anointing is seen to be appropriate and proper. This was not an ordinary occasion, but a unique situation. Jesus was about to lay down his life. He was about to die, and for three days, his body would remain in the grave. And so to mark that distinct occasion, an anointing was called for. This was not an

ordinary duty, but a final duty. Her last duty, her last act of worship and service.

And, according to Calvin, there was a spiritual significance to it, for the anointing of bodies was not an empty rite but a symbol of the hope of resurrection. It was a very timely act of love, one which God brought about in his own providence to proclaim the impending death and promised resurrection of Jesus Christ!

So we are right back where we started. Extravagant devotion. Humble service. Unmeasured and unrestrained acts of love. You and I aren't called today to buy an expensive bottle of perfume and pour it out upon an altar as an act of worship. But you are called to do precisely what this woman did. That is, in the words of Paul,

Rom. 12:1 "...that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service."

Your highest priority is simply this, to demonstrate and express that you do, indeed, love the LORD your God with an extravagant devotion; in other words, "with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength."