

# The Extravagance of Love

Sermon by Pastor Patricia Geiseman

Lent 5

April 6-7, 2019

John 12:1-19

All of our senses participate in receiving beauty and wonderfulness.

*We hear* music that moves our souls and reminds us of loss and love. *We see* purple crocuses peeping from the winter earth and little birds flapping in the bird path, and it brings joy. *We embrace* the warm body of a person we love. And we are not so alone. *We taste* delicious food, prepared with care, and we usually want more. And we *smell* so many fragrances--from flowers to food. We smell rain coming, a new baby's head ... bread baking ... onions and garlic simmering ... and it is wonderful! We are filled with emotions. Smell evokes feelings and brings back memories.

From ancient times, people have valued the importance of fragrance. Even though I knew that perfume dated way back, I was surprised to read that in 2004-2005, excavations in Cyprus unearthed an enormous perfume factory built on an industrial scale, dating back 4,000 years!

The first perfumist recorded was a woman named Tapputi from 1200 BCE in Babylonia. She had a powerful role in Mesopotamian government and religion.

Fragrance became popular in Western culture in the fourteenth century. France quickly became the center.

In the United States we spend about \$45.8 billion dollars a year on fragrances. Both men and women. The most expensive fragrance is Clive Christian No. 1 Imperial Majesty Perfume that retails for is Clive Christian No. 1 Imperial Majesty Perfume per ounce. Put that on your wish list!

Would you like to guess the most popular, by far women's fragrance? Chanel No. 5. Created in 1921. Top notes are woody and powdery, middle notes are floral, and the base notes are citrus and musky.

I have always loved fragrance. I wear it every day. Mostly today I wear a favorite—Acorelle Divine Orchid. An organic, French perfume with a calm, relaxing scent. And it's not even very expensive! In my office I burn scented candles to welcome and diffuse essential oils to calm and protect.

Today we leave Luke's Gospel to hear John tell of Mary's anointing the feet of Jesus. This must have been an important story for the early church; all the Gospel writers include a version of it. Only here in John is the woman identified as Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. Elsewhere, she is unnamed. Luke calls her "a sinner."

In 591 Pope Gregory the Great preached a sermon on Luke's version and identified the unnamed woman as Mary Magdalene and as a woman of ill repute. Luke doesn't say this! It took hundreds of years to free Mary from such an unfair accusation. Finally, Pope Paul VI, in 1969, liberated her! The early church fathers were so threatened by the Mary's leadership and example!

For John, and for us today, Mary is the grateful sister of Lazarus whom, just before this scene in chapter 11, Jesus had raised from the dead.

**Mary's anointing of Jesus is an act of gratitude for the gift of life.** It is an extravagant act of hospitality, love, and gratitude for the friendship of Jesus and for life of her brother Lazarus.

**Mary's hospitality, humility, gratitude, and generosity provide us with a model for discipleship.** Mary wipes Jesus' feet with her hair. Jesus takes the same action in the next chapter as he washes the disciples' feet and wipes them with a towel. John uses the same Greek word. The stories are connected! The foot washing is an example the disciples are supposed to follow; something Mary has already done.

**Mary's action points to Jesus' death.** Mary's story is a Passion Story. In antiquity, anointing with oil had many purposes: kings and priest were consecrated to special roles; the sick were anointed as a ritual for healing; and the dead were anointed for burial. Jesus is the great high priest, the Kings of Kings, the "Healer of Our Every Will" [1], and soon, Jesus will be dead and buried.

Jesus leaves Mary's dinner party in Bethany and heads to Jerusalem. To the cross.

From here we, too, move to the cross. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday. We will wave our branches in celebration, remember and participate in Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. This story invites us to participate in the Passion of Jesus: to celebrate and respond to the life and love we have been given with gratitude and generosity.

The perfume Mary used to anoint the feet of Jesus was expensive. Maybe more expensive than Clive Christian No. 1 Imperial Majesty! Maybe it was her dowry. It must have been wonderful, John tells us: "The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume" (John 12:3).

In this story it was Judas Iscariot who objects to such extravagance. (In other stories the disciples are the objectors.) Judas insisted that the perfume should have been sold and the money given to the poor. John basically tells the readers, "Fat chance of that! This guy is a thief. He doesn't care about the poor."

And Jesus responds: “Leave her alone. She bought it ... for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me” (John 12:7-8).

“*You always have the poor with you*” has been misused over the years as a dismissive way of saying that the poor will always be around.

These words refer to Deuteronomy 15:11, and the original audience would have known this:

Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.”

*Open your hand to the poor ...*

We gather every week for a celebration of passion and death, victory and life. We open the doors to the building and the doors of our hearts. We share a meal that reminds us and connects us with the Passion of Jesus—the Radical Hospitality of a God who welcomes us.

In preparation for our Meal we pray, “The cry of the poor has become your own cry, our hunger and thirst for justice is your own desire...”

At least 46.5 million people, including 1 of every 5 children, are living in poverty, an increase of more than 9 million since 2008. An additional 97.3 million people are officially designated as low-income. This means that 48% of the US population ... is poor or low income.

*The poor you always have with you ...*

The top 1% of the population own 43% of the nation’s wealth: the top 5% own 72% of wealth and the bottom 80% are left with just 7% of wealth. [2]

Inequality feels like an indomitable foe. Systems are as powerful for us as they were in Jesus’ time. “*You will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me...*” is *not* an invitation to apathy and inaction. [3]

Mary’s festival dinner party and extravagant gift of powerful perfume reminds us of other stories of extravagance. And Divine Abundance!

Like lots of wine! 180 gallons of really good wine at a wedding at Cana... this Christ has the power to transform water into wine!

And ... lots of bread. Enough to feed 5,000 people!

And, at the end of John's Gospel, the disciples have caught no fish. Jesus—now the RISEN CHRIST—directs the disciples and 153 fish are caught!

And here, with Mary, her family, neighbors, and friends and Jesus, there is an abundance of fragrant gratitude for the gift of new life.

Here at St. Mark's we celebrate Divine Abundance. Like Jesus, we have been anointed in baptism. We are created in and connected to divine goodness. We teach and practice gratitude. We share ourselves, our time, talents, and resources.

We work together for justice and fairness. We practice kindness, hospitality, and compassion. We value friendship.

This weekend we welcome new people into our community. We make space for them, their stories, gifts, and needs.

This season we have been generous with the needs of the building through the Boiler Match Challenge. Our generous response ensures that the building will have efficient and sufficient heat to stay open for business. We need warmth!

We open our hands to the poor as we gather funds to help support poor women in distant places through businesses of their own. We purchase fruit trees to provide food for people for years to come.

And we are extravagant with time! The choir practices for hours and hours and hours for the concert that will take place next Sunday afternoon. And more hours for songs for Holy Week. The music we hear will bring awe and wonderfulness to our souls!

Teachers plan for hours every week to teach on Wednesdays and Sundays. Yesterday, 21 people gathered to take down a wall in the courtyard for Demo Day. Lots of time and effort. This changes the landscape!

We are extravagant with our food. Every week students in grades 1 through 12 have dinner here. And it is really good! Oftentimes the whole building smells delicious as we anticipate supper together. Many volunteers work in the kitchen to make meals that kids eat in less than 30 minutes!

This coming week, hours will be spent in preparation for the Seder Meal. It is a labor of love. The matzo ball soup brings back and builds memories.

On Palm Sunday men will make pancakes ... comfort food!

Like Mary, we, too experience times when we are desperately sad and at a loss. And times when we are overwhelmingly grateful and full of joy.

Mother Teresa said that loneliness is the greatest kind of poverty.

We are extravagant with our time as we seek to befriend, support, comfort, and understand each other through prayer and presence.

Indeed, in our life together all of our senses participate in receiving and in sharing beauty and wonderfulness.

Our stories are connected through shared memories and emotions to the stories of history. To Mary, the Model Disciple ... and to Jesus, who soon will be the Crucified and Risen Christ.

Amen.

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#### Resources

[1] Haugen, Marty, "Healer of Every Ill," hymn.

[2] Trozzo, Lindsey, "Commentary on John 12:1-8," [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org), April 1, 2019.

[3] Trozzo, Lindsey, "Commentary on John 12:1-8."

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#### *Reflection Questions:*

- Do we care about the wellbeing of others as much as our own?
- Who has been returned to us?
- Can we join Mary and celebrate healing, health, hope, forgiveness and life?
- What has been restored to us?
- Are we willing to share what we have for the freedom, health, and wellbeing of another?