

PRAYER: Heavenly Father, may I sit at Your feet and worship You with all that I am and all that I have - and may the beauty of Jesus become a life-giving fragrance of His love to all with whom I come in contact today, in Jesus' name I pray, AMEN.

THE EXTRAVAGANT GIFT

Catching up on the story: Jesus has made quite the stir. The religious leadership are not fond of him at all. In fact, on several occasions they have tried to arrest him but with no success. The reason that the religious leadership are so upset with Jesus is because he, among other things, has claimed to be God. Of course, this is in fact true, and it is one of the things that John, the author of this gospel, is most concerned about.

Not only is Jesus proclaiming with words his divine sonship, but he is producing signs that point to his ultimate mastery over death. The narrative that takes place just before our passage for today is entirely concerned with Jesus' ability to defeat death. Jesus' friend Lazarus is ill and his friends and family would like Jesus to come and heal him. Not being in a hurry, Jesus lingers where he is for a few days. He'll say, a little later, that his tardiness is so that his disciples will see and believe. Before Jesus actually raises Lazarus from the dead, he proclaims, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). Jesus will back up his words with action. Even though Lazarus has been dead for at least four days, Jesus will raise him from the dead.

Word of this great sign travels quickly. Soon, the religious leaders hear of it and become afraid that all the people will now follow after Jesus and there will be a revolt against Rome. Caiaphas, the High Priest, knows better. It will be better that one man dies so that the whole nation might not be destroyed. From here on out, in the Gospel of John, the religious leaders seek, not just to have Jesus arrested, but to have him killed.

The gospel story for today was very famous in the early church, and we find four accounts of this same story recorded in our four gospels. Each of the four versions of this story is slightly different, but we can learn something from each of the four versions. It is difficult to harmonize all the details, but a reader senses that it is the same story. Basically, there seems to be two versions of the same story: the one found in the synoptic gospels and the second version of the same story found in the Gospel of John. The structure of the story is the same in all the gospels; it is the details that are different.

The story for today is a classic. It is a famous one. Christians have loved this story throughout the centuries.

The essential features or structure of the story are this: The incident happened right before the Passover, near Jerusalem, in the little village of Bethany right outside of Jerusalem. This incident happened in a home apparently owned by a Simon in three of our gospels. A particular woman, who is unnamed in three of our gospels, takes a pound of expensive perfume that was valued at three hundred denarii; that is, three hundred days work. This was very expensive perfume; you would have to work for a year in order to earn enough money to purchase this expensive and extravagant perfume. This woman takes this exorbitantly expensive perfume, lets down the tightly wrapped bun of her hair, wrapped around her head, and she lets her hair fall and begins to wash the feet of Jesus. She is weeping, kissing Jesus' feet, anointing his feet with the perfume as a gesture of deepest love, drying his feet with her long, falling hair. In the middle of this tender, emotionally riveting scene, there is a spoilsport, someone who wants to spoil the mood. In the gospel for today from John, the spoilsport is Judas, the keeper of the money purse who grumbles, "This gesture of this woman is a real waste of money. This expensive perfume could have been sold and given to the poor." Jesus defends the woman and says, "Leave the woman alone. The poor you will always have with you. She is preparing me for my burial by anointing my body with oil."

Our Gospel lesson captures a significant moment during the final days of Jesus' life; a story of incredible love and impetuous excess. The journey to Jerusalem that our Lord predicted during the Epiphany Season has become a cold reality as Holy Week approaches. John tells us that Jesus is at the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, a place that was an island of serenity for him during a troubling time.

Storm clouds are gathering around Jesus' head. The Pharisees and the Temple posse were nipping at Jesus' ankles and plotting his destruction. Our Lord's determination to speak with a Samaritan woman, heal on the Sabbath, and eat with the unclean has essentially drafted his death sentence. His decision to return to within five miles of Jerusalem, in order to raise his friend Lazarus from the dead, has given his enemies an opportunity to pounce upon him and bring a quick end to this Jesus Movement.

But for a little while all the ugliness and threats are pushed back as Jesus settles into the quiet oasis of his friends' home in Bethany. His friends had scheduled this meal as a time to thank Jesus for bringing Lazarus back to life. Soothing conversation creates a sense of well-being, wonderful smells begin to emanate from Martha's kitchen, and Jesus experiences a rare moment of joy and serenity.

In her unique way, sister Martha served supper to Jesus and his disciples. No doubt Our Lord sat close to his friend Lazarus, everyone politely avoiding the reality that Lazarus was the cause for bringing Jesus to Jerusalem and exposing him to all the danger that surrounded him in the Holy City. Jesus once said, "no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for a friend." (John 15: 13). In bringing Lazarus from the dead, Jesus put into practice what he had preached and soon would pay the price, proving the truth of that old cliché: no act of kindness goes unpunished!

Scholars agree that the raising of Lazarus was the last straw in so far as the Jewish authorities were concerned. John quotes their alarm over the growing influence of Jesus, which brought one of them to say: "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." (John 11: 48) And so they were active in their plotting to bring Jesus down.

Into this context of internal tranquility and external strife, sister Mary appeared dramatically. She had been in her room but now she suddenly returns with a clay jar, filled with a costly ointment. She knelt and broke open the jar, filling the room with a pungent mint-like aroma. All eyes were focused on Mary as she loosened her hair, something a single woman never did in public, and then proceeded to pour the oil, not on Jesus' head but on his feet. In the process she touched him, another violation of the prevailing sense of social decorum in the Jewish society of the day. And then to bring this bizarre spectacle to a conclusion, 'Mary wiped her Lord's feet with her hair.'

There are similar stories in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but only John places this event in the home of Jesus' special friends in Bethany. Only in John's account is the woman who anoints Jesus given a name: Mary. We know that she loved to sit at Jesus' feet and learn from him, even when that meant abandoning her sister to the work of preparing the meals. But now it is Mary's turn to be front and center and express the feelings of her heart.

As stated, not everyone is appreciative of this selfless act. There is a complaint from religious people, who are offended by the boldness of a woman, whom they believe has acted in a highly sensual and inappropriate manner. In some versions of this story the Pharisees are present and they feel that Jesus should have prevented this highly intimate expression of love. But clearly the woman is causing no harm and Jesus commends her for what she has done. She alone understands what is about to happen and she is literally anointing Jesus for the grave.

Another objection is set forth in the words of Judas: "why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (John 12:5) How common it is for people to see apparent "excesses" in the behavior of others while they find nothing inappropriate in their own priorities and self-indulgence.

But what is the message that we should take away from today's Gospel lesson?

The first thing we should learn is the importance of giving. Mary gave the finest gift that she had. Her giving was reckless, impulsive, and extravagant. But what Jesus would have us learn from this woman is the importance of a generous heart. Mary gave freely, lovingly, without constraint. I think we need that inspiration. Most of us are rather unimaginative and self-protective when it comes to giving. We want to know what is the least we can give and not be embarrassed. We love free admission and our day is complete if we can park at a meter with unexpired time. And yet, faith in Jesus calls us to be people of a generous heart and spirit.

Giving is a critical challenge, particularly in a troubled economy. But it is a challenge we need to lift up from time to time here at Fifth Ave. United Methodist Church. Are you living into your financial commitment as members of this congregation? People of God, \$20.00 dollars does not go very far at the gas station, in the grocery store, or our weekly mailing (bulletins, devotions, sermons) to our sick and shut in and our homebound.

People of Fifth Ave. United Methodist Church, we can be more generous and we must if we want to see this congregation prosper and take the light of Christ into the world.

Another thing we learn from our Gospel lesson is the power of proper receiving. Jesus let this woman express her extravagant love by receiving her gift. We need to learn to be more open to gifts that can come to us particularly through the life of the Church. So many people resist a deeper involvement in congregational life, refusing to accept the honor of serving in the life of the Church. (Not stepping up to serve in the church, ministries or outreach) People are avoiding joining the intimacy of a congregation or entering into common human causes with others. The saddest thing is when people stubbornly refuse to accept the gift and talents that God seeks to give us in Jesus Christ, gift or talent that comes wrapped up with meaningful participation in the life of a Christian congregation.

Finally, we need to remember that when we blend giving and receiving, we create that wonderful reality we call sharing. Faith and meaningful life in Christian community is not a one and done thing. We do not get it like a diploma or an inoculation. Christianity is an invitation to go on a shared journey, a journey that enriches us as we enrich others. Christianity provides us an opportunity to be blessed, as we become a blessing.

A sacred example of this giving and receiving will be shared shortly through the Lord's Supper (Holy Communion). I am convinced that Holy Communion is not something we simply receive by hand to mouth, but it is our entire life lived with others for the sake of the Gospel.

As we prepare to celebrate the sacred mysteries of Holy Week and the Passion of Our Lord, let us remember that at the heart of it all is the simple truth: God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. (John 3: 16) Let us also remember that Christian faith without passion, without giving, without extravagance, is a pretty dull thing. Jesus gave himself lavishly, generously, completely for the sake of the world. Let us dwell in that gift and commit ourselves to lives that are given wholly to his service. **AMEN.**