

Sermon Text – Sunday, April 3, 2022 – Pastor Paula Kraus

**First Reading: Isaiah 43:16-21, Second Reading: Philippians 3:4-14,
Gospel Reading for the message: John 12:1-8**

Sacrificial Giving

How often do we hear this story without wondering? What was Mary's purpose for sacrificing this costly bottle of pure nard and anointing Jesus' feet? Do you think she knew, as Jesus states, that she was anointing Jesus in preparation for burial? Mary had been listening to Jesus, sitting at his feet, and hanging on his words – Mary could have discerned what Jesus has been trying to teach the men. Maybe Mary knew that the chief priest was devising a plan to have Jesus arrested and killed because of the attention the resuscitation of Lazarus drew. Mary, in this symbolic act of anointing him, not only prepared for Jesus' death but also gave Jesus a most unique extravagant, intimate gift.

Imagine this scene – in less than a week Jesus would be crucified. He knew that and I wonder what was his mood? They were resting at a meal given at the home of Lazarus their host and his sisters Martha, and Mary. Jesus had been at the home before; this is the same Mary that Martha complained was shirking her duties by sitting at Jesus feet and listening to his stories while Martha served those at the meal. Jesus was with friends and family relaxing. I am sure there was rejoicing at that meal over the fact that Jesus resuscitated Lazarus from the dead – I will guess that took some getting used to and was a reason to celebrate. I am seeing in my mind a Sunday family dinner with the usual conversations at the table and the friendly family banter that goes on in most households.

Imagine now that suddenly Mary brings in this large amount of costly perfume and anoints Jesus with it – a pint of perfume is a lot! Imagine the aroma filling the room where they ate – overpowering the cooking aromas. The sweet smell of the perfume would be sensational,

not to mention the intimacy of wiping Jesus' feet with her hair. Then there are thoughts of the appropriateness of such an extravagantly wasteful [prodigal] action. A year's wage was about three hundred denarii – that could help a lot of people. I am guessing that Judas Iscariot was not the only one who questioned whether there was a better use for that perfume.

Think for a minute what Judas was complaining about. We know, and Jesus knew, that Judas' real interest was the money. The narrator tells us that he was not sincere in wanting to use the money to help the poor, but he could have been at least superficially interested in social justice. Maybe Judas felt justified in taking some of the proceeds from the 'collections' to support himself – after all he did work for the sake of the poor. Can we see that Judas was missing the point – the point Jesus reminded him of, that Jesus would not always be with them? Judas failed to realize who Jesus was – what Jesus' presence meant to the group gathered at that house on that day. Judas was more focused on the day-to-day practicality of the disciples work than he was on being thankful for Jesus' presence.

Mary, on the other hand, had a lot to be thankful to Jesus for. Jesus has restored her brother to life. Jesus accepted Mary and allowed her to learn from him. Jesus was a frequent guest at the home of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus; their friendship was a blessing for that family. Imagine, Jesus feeling as if he could drop by your home anytime! So, this anointing was from a place of love and gratitude. I wonder, was this an awkward thing for Mary to do? How long did she have to weigh the cost of such a sacrifice? Do you think she was concerned what the others would think of her "wastefulness" in using this expensive perfume for Jesus?

Mary's actions illustrate for us costly devotion to following Jesus and an extravagant, sacrificial love. Furthermore, although Mary's gift was extravagant think of how much more extravagant the gift Jesus was about to give – his life. One wonders too what Jesus' thoughts

were, the thoughts that he did not express aloud – I mean here was this woman wiping his feet clean with her hair. Was he surprised? Did he feel joy or sorrow – knowing what would soon happen? This might be one of those moments that would have us thinking – what the heck is happening! I think we cannot escape the wonder that this scene evokes – what would it be like to witness this?

It is that sense of wonder that calls to us – what would that type of extravagant love look like in our world. I am thinking about the ‘cost’ of that type of devotion in our world today. Would we be willing to give that extravagantly to Jesus? Would this church? I can only imagine. Can we recall instances of that type of extravagant, sacrificial love in our world today? What about the examples we witness from places like Afghanistan, Africa, Ukraine, and anywhere people are helping people?

What is the good news here – what can we learn from the experience of being at the home of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary? If we use our senses to be with Jesus in that time, to see, hear, and smell what can we learn from the moment? Can you feel a little of Mary’s joy at being able to lavish such an extravagant gift of presence and love on Jesus?

But you know Judas was not wrong – the disciples could have used the money that perfume would bring to help the poor. That was Jesus’ mission, wasn’t it? One can see the practicality of Judas’s plan – even while knowing that Judas’s self-interest was corrupting his good intentions. Don’t we want a church that is practical with its gifts? Shouldn’t we be better stewards of our resources and allow only a measured response to the needs of others – making sure that we take care of us first? Wouldn’t that be the most practical use of our gifts?

Is that the message for us today? What are we willing to give extravagantly to Jesus? Can we make such a sacrifice today? Can we be sacrificial in our giving to each other? to the

Church? Think about making the challenging decisions about how to use our gifts. Do we use them to express joy and gratitude for Jesus' presence, or are we practical and measured with how we use our gifts? What would it look like if we were joyfully extravagant with sacrificial love for God, our neighbors, and ourselves?

We have been, I have been, thinking a lot lately about how we care for each other and our community. These are things a church and church leaders should be thinking about. And I wonder if we sometimes are too rigid in contemplating these things. Something I read in a commentary resonated with me and I want to share it with you:

Loving God with a full heart means that we serve one another and do not become trapped or immobilized by false either / or choices. Sometimes the call of the heart is to give fully without counting in advance the cost or the benefit to ourselves. Loving service as an act of faith is not about giving so that we may then get something in return.¹

What Mary did, in that house on that day, was to love Jesus sacrificially, extravagantly, and with her whole heart. I do not think she gave much thought to the consequences of her actions or how she could better use that gift. Although Judas claimed to be concerned about how to use that gift to benefit the poor, he had his own self interest in mind.

So, I wonder, this church has done things in the past for our community or to benefit those who are less fortunate. Some how we have convinced ourselves of the impracticality of some of these activities and we have stopped. I admit I have been in the forefront of practicality over extravagance. But I wonder if this rigidness is what has led us to this current state of dissatisfaction.

¹ Koppel, Michael S. "Pastoral Perspective: John 11:55 – 12:11" *Feasting on the Gospels: John Vol 2* Jarvis Cynthia A. & Johnson, E. Elizabeth ed. Westminster John Knox. 2015. 74-78. Print.

You are aware that I have been doing a project in anticipation of my seminary graduation, a project to revision the roles of elder and deacon in this congregation. The elders and deacons are the leaders of the church, you are the ones who make the worship service what it is. Right now, there is a lack of participation, we are holding back our gifts. We are spending too much time thinking about a better use. I feel that a revisioning is necessary because I think we can do more for each other and for the community. I also feel that we are hoarding our gifts if we are not using them to bring joy and abundance in our worship.

I think a revisioning is necessary because the moments of joyous participation in worship are rare. I feel joy, in fact when I work to prepare the worship service, I feel joy and when I stand in front of you and say “Good Morning Church” I feel joy. So, I wonder if because, for the most part, I am doing this alone – am I robbing you of joy? Maybe Janet too feels joy when she works with those who provide the special music for the congregation, and those who do solos or duets they also feel joy in sharing their talents. Wendy might also feel joy as she works every day, very hard, as Church and Board Secretary. There are several people who get joy from serving this church and this congregation. Are we the only ones who get to experience the joy of sharing our gifts?

As a result, over the past several weeks I have been soliciting people to think about using their talents in the roles of elder and deacon. I have been thinking about how we can be a team that works together to bring the experience of joy back to our worship services. We have had good meetings with people who are willing to vision with me. I even see some excitement growing among people who want to bring their gifts to the worship experience.

Given the circumstances, I think we can be successful in revisioning a role for elders and deacons in this congregation and bring joy back to our worship services. We find joy as we lean

into being the body of Christ and caring for each other. That care includes self-care, care for our worship experience, care for the Pastor and other leaders, and care for the community. It is possible to be generous with our gifts and be good stewards of our assets – this is not a mutually exclusive thing. Using our gifts does not mean we use them up – sharing love does not mean that there is less for us. Love and caring are not limited resources. We can be extravagantly, sacrificially loving of Jesus and each other without losing anything of ourselves.

So, I wonder what are we willing to give in a prodigal fashion, even if others might consider that gift foolish? What would it look like for this church to fall back in love with Jesus and to pour out our expensive bottles of perfume in a joyous expression of that love?