

Extravagant Love

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Rev. Jeff Mansfield



Wayne Forte, Anointing His Feet #2

Preaching on:

John 12:1-8

Can you imagine this scene with me for a minute, just let it really run through your imagination, and let go of all your preconceived notions that if it's printed in the Bible it must be a scene of piety. Because when I hear about this scene, I do not see in my mind a traditional scene of piety, and I don't think that people living in Jesus' time or the people sitting in that room, would've thought, "Yeah, this is the kind of thing we do all the time." Sure. There were two sisters living in that house, one was named Martha and one was named Mary.

Martha was doing exactly what a woman of her day and age was expected to do. She was serving and she was a marvel servant, and we respect that. As church goes, as people who want to make a difference, as Christians, we admire those who know how to serve. Didn't Jesus come to serve? And didn't he call himself a servant? And so, there is Martha serving and doing exactly what she's supposed to do. And then her sister Mary, steps out from beside her, leaves the serving plates and all that work, and she does something very unexpected.

She walks into a room full of men, a sort of a public place, a place where she is not supposed to be necessarily moving freely, and she takes down her hair. That's the first thing. She takes down her hair. We have a phrase now, "Letting your hair down" while it comes from the times when wearing your hair up and braided was the only way you were allowed to wear it and taking your hair down was not the way that you were supposed to be seen in public, especially if you were a woman. In fact, if you were to go out onto the street, the women on the street who wore their hair down in public, they would've been identifying themselves as prostitutes. It was a strange thing to take your hair down in public, an intimate thing, an awkward thing. And she walks in with a pound of perfume.

Have you ever been on a plane or something or you're on a train or you go out to a restaurant and there's somebody sitting nearby you who is just wearing like a touch too much perfume or cologne? You've been in that situation, you've smelled it, right? And you thought, "Man, you just went, a little dab'll do ya." That's the rule, a little dab'll do ya and you did maybe three dabs and it's just a little bit too much. And here comes Mary, into, what I assume is, a small enclosed place where people are trying to eat, with a pound of perfume. One pound. Can you imagine that? How extravagant that is? How ridiculous that is? It's absurd. It's almost obscene and it costs \$300, 300 denarii to have this much perfume in her possession. And if you look into it, 300 denarii, that was about a year's salary for an average worker at that time.

A year's salary on a pound of perfume, with her hair down. And from there, it just gets a little more awkward because she gets down on the ground, where Jesus' feet are. His dirty, disgusting feet. This man walked around all over Palestine, and Israel, and Jerusalem, and Galilee, in sandals and bare feet. Can you imagine how dirty this man's feet were? How calloused? How rough? And she gets down there in the dirt, with his smirky, dirty feet. How many of you would be comfortable taking your feet out in public? Just putting them up here, maybe plopping them right up on the pews, taking your shoes and your socks off, and just let somebody just start massaging them.

How many of you would feel comfortable if Dorothy did it, and you all just had to sit there and watch? It's weird. It's over the top. It's wild and extravagant. And down there on the ground, rubbing that pound of perfume into his feet, the fragrance filling the whole room, she takes that hair which was supposed to be up and she starts to rub her hair on his feet. And we have now crossed the boundary from awkward into, wow, that's not piety, that's intimacy, that is something special, that is something that I have to turn my head away a little bit, because it's so intense. And then Judas asks, a question that I think that all of us would ask.

The author of the gospel of John, really tries to make us doubt that Judas, that this question is one that we should even think about, before the question starts he says, "It's Judas, remember the guy who's about to betray Jesus. Remember, don't forget that. So don't listen to this question too carefully." And then after the question comes, the author reminds us, "And remember Judas doesn't

care about poor people, he's just a thief. He wanted the money for himself. So she must, he wanted that money to go into his purse so he could steal it." But the question is a perfectly practical question. "My God, this is too much. I mean, we're all thinking it, this is too much a year's salary. This big show, all of this perfume. What is the point? Tell me. What is the point when we could have taken that money and we could have done what we know we're supposed to do with it, which is to give it to the poor." Jesus has been telling us to do that all along. And don't we want to ask that question?

We who do so much to raise money at antique sales, and rummage sales, and with our mission and justice work, raising money and giving it to where it really needs to go, when we have our kids drop their coins and their dollar bills into a giant bottle to go to Ukraine, how could this be acceptable? Is this what Christian service is? Why does Jesus not just accept this extravagance, but almost seem to prefer it? He defends her. He says, "Yes, this is okay." I think, the answer has to be, that this is more than an act of service, that it is an act of love. And sometimes, and I think, all the time when Jesus is talking about love and the gospel. Love has to break the rules. Love sometimes has to go a little bit too far. Love has to show itself so big that it grabs our attention, because at that time, and in our world today, we live in a world where there is so much that is shocking, and obscene, and heartbreaking, and raw that grabs our attention, and breaks our hearts.

How do we respond? Is it just by sending a check over to the tragedy? Or do we need to create a world, a vision, an opportunity for the opposite, to express love and as big a way as tragedy expresses itself? I think that's what Mary was doing. She knew that Jesus was going to the cross, Jesus knew it, that tragedy, that every holy week, seizes our entire imagination. And she said, "I'm going to produce something beautiful, that can stand in front of that cross and hold its head high. I am going to love, and I am going to do it so extravagantly, so beautifully that it is going to shock you. It is going to draw your attention. You're going to want to look away, but you're not going to be able to, you're going to be stuck there, looking at that expression of love, extravagant love, not practical love."

In our lives, in the work that we do, in your passions, in your ministry, are you doing the practical thing all the time? The practical thing is the right thing to do most of the time. But we have to remember that there have to be moments of extravagance, of wildness, where magic fills the air, where we grab people's attention, we shock them, maybe beloved, we even offend them a little bit with this good news that we have. Because the good news that we have is a good news that flips the entire world on its head. And so there should be moments, when we express that good news, that it flips people's expectations out and they say, "Wait a minute, wait a minute. I don't know, should that be happening? I don't know about that. It seems like too much. It seems too big. It seems too wild. Settle down, settle down. What's the point?" And then we can tell them what the point is. The point is love.

This is how we're supposed to love. Like Mary loves. As a church, I think that we are a well respected institution. We do things the right way. There is nothing in this church, and there are many wonderful things about this church, and there is nothing amongst those many wonderful things that I think would

cause anybody any offense, wouldn't shock them. I don't even think it would surprise them very much. We are a place where you can expect good things. I wonder if we could add to that one little bit here and there of wild extravagance, where we grab people's attention with the force, and the power, and the expression of our love. I wonder if you can do that in your life.

Don't just send the check out. Love. We are called to love God and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. And if that just looks like practical ministry, just doing the best little bit that you can. There is nothing wrong with that, but there should be always something a little more, that big, powerful, bold expression of God's love. That's how God came to us, in the flesh, in Jesus, on the cross. How do we express that good news? How do we show that extravagance?

Let us pray. Holy God, thank you for all of the practical ways that you have given us to serve. Fill us with your spirit and help our love to shine out to this world in a way that will fill it with a fragrance of love and joy so powerful, that no one will be able to look away. Amen.