

Sermon: "The Extravagant Gift"
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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THE BAKER

The front of the unemployment office was all brick.
No one ever saw what happened inside.

Next to it was a bakery with a plate glass window; and it was never a secret what went on inside it. Every day everybody who passed by could see the baker "doing his thing". And that is why people noticed.

The baker everybody liked to watch had taken to doing "unbaker-like" things. He began making sandwiches at lunchtime and giving them to people standing next door in the unemployment line. He didn't charge anybody. He just walked down the line and handed the sandwiches out, never saying a word.

This was news. So the local TV station decided to "scoop" it, sent in the mini-cam crew and a journalist to get the story. "So, why are you doing this?" the young woman asked.

The baker said, "When I was twenty, I went hungry for a week. Then a man who didn't know me from a hole in the wall took me in until I got on my feet." He said no more. He just smiled as if everything was now accounted for.

Whatever happened to that baker when he was twenty, from a Christian point of view he got the message. He not only remembers what was done to him he does it in turn to others. It is what John is intent on telling us this week: that there is a fundamental response to the story of Jesus; and extravagant love is its name.

WASTEFUL?

But, some are not happy with that loving response. It seems too extravagant, too wasteful. How can a baker make a living if he doesn't charge for his wares, and how can the poor be fed if resources are scandalously wasted? That was the problem Judas had with Mary's act of devotion. Mary had "wasted" expensive perfume washing Jesus' feet. It simply wasn't good stewardship.

According to my commentary, the three hundred denarii that the perfume cost would have been nearly a year's wages for a laborer. Judas had a point when he said that the money could have been used to help the poor. It was a wasteful display. Perhaps the money could have been spent for a better purpose.

But, according to Jesus, there was more to this act than just an extravagant display of love. According to Jesus, this was an act that went beyond the devotion of a disciple for her Master. This was an anointing for burial. This was a symbolic act, foreshadowing Jesus' coming death on the cross.

Remember, next week is Palm Sunday, and Good Friday looms on the horizon. In all the gospels the story is the same. The cross was no accident. Jesus was not a victim of circumstance. He was a Divine Savior who willingly took on and defeated the powers of evil through his death and

resurrection. Jesus told Judas, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

This is another verse that has been taken out of context and misused through the years. Some people have said, "Well, Jesus tells us that we'll always have the poor. Perhaps we shouldn't worry so much about the plight of the poor. Maybe that's just how it should be for some people." Actually, what Jesus said was probably in reference to Deuteronomy 15:11 which reads, "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.'"

We need to remember that Jesus also said that when we care for the poor or a person in need it's as if we had cared for Him. (See Matthew 25:31-46) So, we certainly can't use this passage as a reason to be uninterested about the plight of the poor.

FOR THE LOVE OF MONEY

Instead, this passage reminds us that the motives of those who profess concern for the poor are not always pure. According to our passage for today, Judas wasn't really worried about the plight of the poor. He was worried about lining his own pockets.

Judas was a thief. Judas was entrusted with the group's money, and he betrayed that trust by dipping into the till whenever it suited his fancy. When Mary broke the expensive perfume at the feet of Jesus and the smell wafted through the house, Jesus smelled the sweet scent of devotion. Judas, on the other hand, smelled the scent of money, money down the drain, money that he could have been his.

If there's one thing that people are religious about, it's their money. And they will do anything to get it. The Bible tells us that the love of money is the root of all evil (1 Timothy 6:10), and I believe that is profoundly true.

For the love of money friends have sold out friends, families have been torn apart and crimes have been committed. If you want to find out what is wrong with our society, follow the money trail. Find out who is paying off the politicians, and you will find the truth about the principalities and the powers of this world. They may talk about their concern for the poor, but watch out. Many are only concerned about lining their own pockets.

In recent years there have been many movies and plays that have speculated about the motives of Judas in betraying Jesus. But, quite often they have ignored the obvious motive, greed. Judas simply wanted more money and power. Thirty pieces of silver was the price of betrayal. What a paltry sum to give for a life, especially the life of the Son of God, but people are sold down the river for much less every day.

Judas, like the other disciples, expected Jesus to start a political rebellion and overthrow Rome. As treasurer, Judas certainly assumed (as did the other disciples—see Mark 10:35-37) that he would be given an important position in Jesus' new government.

But when Jesus praised Mary for pouring out perfume worth a year's salary, Judas may have realized for the first time that Jesus' kingdom was not physical or political, but spiritual. Judas's greedy desire for money and status could not be realized if he continued to follow Jesus. So he decided on a different course of action. Judas decided to betray Jesus in exchange for money and favor from the religious leaders.

Money does have a deceptively sweet smell. We may think that we control our urge to revel in the sweet smell of success, but before long that aroma can steal our very soul. I wonder if Judas

really knew what a big role the love of money played in his betrayal of Jesus. Perhaps Judas really thought that the money from the sale of this expensive perfume could have been used for the poor. Maybe his embezzlement of the disciple's funds had been so gradual that he was unaware of his true motives.

But in the end, those who make money their god will choke on their own greed. What we desire most deeply often brings despair instead of happiness. So it was with Judas, and so it will be for those of us who succumb to the temptation of money and power.

Lest we think that this story is just about Judas and other people who are weak, let me remind you that the motive of greed is alive and well not only in our society but also in the church as well. Those with money and power often seduce the church. Sometimes we sanction what we should condemn to gain favor with "the powers that be." In the name of practicality we often hoard the resources that God has given us. We believe that we are serving God by being "careful" when in reality our timid ways betray a lack of trust.

AN EXTRAVAGANT FAITH

Christian faith is not and never has been about being careful and prudent. Christian faith is not about being a "sanctified bean counter." Christian faith is about being extravagant. Christian faith is about loving in ways that we can't "afford." Christian faith is about paying any price for that one great pearl of hope.

I can't think of anything more extravagant than the One who stands at the heart of the Christian faith. God as revealed in Jesus holds nothing back. Even the life of His Son is not too high a price to pay. God loves the world, and God gives the world everything. Love is many things, but love is never practical. Love is about the sweet smell of one who gives up everything on behalf of the other.

We Presbyterians pride ourselves on doing things "decently and in order," and usually that's a pretty good motto. But, this story suggests to me that there comes a time when the love of God in Jesus Christ might cause us to do something extravagant and risky instead. This story suggests to me that there might come a time when we might actually have to do something that's not printed in the bulletin!

Now don't get me wrong. I'm a decently and in order kind of guy. I believe in carefully managing the resources that God has given us. That's just good stewardship.

But, I also believe stewardship has a more important component than just good management. That component is extravagant love, the extravagant love of God as first revealed in Jesus. Sometimes our desire to do things decently and in order can keep us from doing those things that are beautiful and loving.

STEWARDS OF LOVE

A member of a Stewardship Committee told of participating in a "Stewardship Sunday." His job was to visit church member's homes and seek their financial support for the year. Now usually these campaigns are about as much fun as a root canal, but he said that instead of being a chore, this campaign turned out to be a fascinating, eye-opening experience. He said that the "act of being asked for money evoked from people their true feelings about the church and their faith: the joyful rejoiced, the self-centered resisted and the unhappy complained."

Two visits stood out in particular. One was to a chief development officer for a major charity. He thought that visit would be a piece of cake. After all, this guy would undoubtedly know the value

of charitable work and would respond to the church with great generosity. Not so. To his great astonishment, the guy didn't even let him in the house. Instead, he opened the front door an inch, took the pledge card through the crack, scribbled a pittance on it as committee member waited and shoved it back "pulling the door closed with a crisp and final snap."

The next visit provided a surprise of a more pleasant nature. It was a visit with an elderly widow on a fixed income. She and her striped cat lived in a modestly furnished apartment. He said, "When I told her I was from the church, she said that she was pleased to see me, invited me in for a chat, during which she indicated her appreciation for all the church had meant to her. When the time came to pass over the pledge card, she took it from my hand with joy and increased her pledge, which I knew would mean sacrifice for her."

How do you account for this woman's generosity and devotion? No doubt many of you know from your own stewardship campaigns that this is not an unusual story. Quite often generosity and devotion come from the most unlikely of places while those whom you would think would be generous are not.

Perhaps the difference is that some people have learned that life has a deeper meaning than just collecting more "stuff." Some people have learned that loving others extravagantly and sacrificially is the only way to truly find life worth living.

A DEEPER MEANING

A friend told of a trip to the movies. He said,

"We had barely slipped into our seats when a group of teenagers jostled into the row behind us. They were having a great time, noisily talking and teasing and laughing.

During the previews, the conversation became even more animated as each kid weighed in on the merits of a coming attraction. Every so often I would turn around to dart a glance in their direction, a look I hoped would come across as a serious but not-too-parental appeal for theater courtesy. I was relieved when the opening credits of the feature finally started to roll and the group quieted down.

But not for long. One of the teenagers had evidently already seen the movie, and was eager to serve as plot guide for the others. "Omgosh," she croaked in a stage whisper, as the male lead made his first appearance, "he is going to like fall for her so-o-o hard."

"Look, look," our cinematic guide shrieked a few moments later, "he forgot to put the key back under the mat. Did'ja see that? That's how the cops are gonna catch him!" With one huge "whoosh," all dramatic suspense rushed out of the room."

Our lesson for today is a bit like those teens commenting on the movie. Mary is anointing Jesus, and at first the narrator seems like the teenager in the theater. Notice the whispered asides. "Look," John confides, "there's Lazarus! He was raised from the dead in the prequel. Hey, keep your eye on that guy Judas! Don't believe a word of that caring-for-the-poor stuff. Judas is really a thief and worse!"

Why does John do that? Why can't John just let the story unfold on its own? Do we really need this voice behind us constantly spilling the beans on the plot?

In the case of John, this tendency to give whispered asides is not some strange quirk. It is the way that John does theology. John is convinced that there is a deeper meaning to life, that hidden in the ordinary events of life are signs of the eternal.

So, from John's perspective, we need two sound tracks, one to tell the story and the other to tell the deeper story. John wants us to go to this ordinary dinner party in Bethany, but not to miss the hint of resurrection we can see in Lazarus.

He wants us to hear Judas's pious speech about caring for the poor but also to discern in those words the treachery that lies in the human heart. He wants us to see Mary not just as hostess but as prophet. He wants us to see her anointing of Jesus not as a mere impulse of indulgence, but as a costly act of worship.

Jesus is not merely eating and drinking with friends; he is the lamb at the Passover feast, and John wants us to smell the fragrance of the perfume that fills the house as the aroma of holy death. John whispers between the lines of the story because he wants us to see what is truly happening, and to believe.

COMMUNION

Tom Long told of returning to a church as a guest preacher where he had once served as a student pastor. After the service, he struck up a conversation with a woman whom he had not seen in many years. "How is your dad?" he asked. "I remember him as one of my favorite people."

"I lost my dad last summer" she said sadly. "Cancer. But he lived a long and good life," she added, "and in many ways he died a peaceful death. The last few moments of his life were amazing.

"My sister, my brother and I were with him when he died. He had a stroke a few days before and lost his speech. You can imagine how hard that was on my father."
"Yes," I nodded. "Your father loved to talk, loved to tell a good story."

"About an hour before he died, he began a hard struggle. He was using this last bit of energy to try to speak. He seemed to have something he really wanted to communicate. It was terribly frustrating for him and painful to watch. Finally he pointed at my brother and motioned toward the sink in his room. My sister said, 'He wants some water,' and my brother went to the sink and poured a glass.

He brought it over to my father, but Dad refused it and made a gesture toward my brother as if to say, 'No, you drink it.' My brother hesitated for a moment and then took a sip from the glass. My father then motioned with his hand, as if to say, 'Pass it to your sister.' My brother handed me the glass, and my father repeated the gesture.

"It was then that it dawned on my sister. 'He's serving communion,' she said quietly."
Through these gestures, her father communicated that this was no ordinary hospital room, but a chapel; no ordinary dying, but a sacred and faithful death.

THE WORLD IS FILLED WITH THE FRAGRANCE

I believe that as Mary's anointing made the house in Bethany into a sanctuary and transformed that meal into a type of the Lord's Supper, so all our moments can be transformed by the power of the Spirit of Christ.

If Mary had anointed the head of Jesus, Judas would have liked it better. That would have been the anointing of a king. That would have been a claim to the power and prestige that he wanted.

But, Jesus took another road, the road of a suffering servant. According to this passage, she anointed his feet, the anointing of a burial.

What a waste to use such expensive perfume in that way! And for that matter, what a waste for Jesus to die on the cross! Or was it?

That sweet smell of God's extravagant love filled not only that house long ago but it also filled the world. We'll learn in the coming weeks that it is a beautiful odor that even the smell of death will not be able to overcome.