

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida  
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### John 12:1-8 (NRSV)

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. [2] There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. [3] Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. [4] But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, [5] "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" [6] (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) [7] Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. [8] You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

### EXPENSIVE LOVE

Love is expensive. Just ask a young couple about to be married. They wanted to keep it simple, but one thing leads to another, and that simple wedding turns into a big production. It's understandable. Love is expensive. Love requires a lavish display.

Some might say that it's wasteful, that the money could have been better used in some other way. But, those who love know differently.

No price is too high when it comes to love.  
Love requires extravagance.

In essence that's what our lesson for today. It's about the high cost of love. In this case it's not the high price of romantic love but the high price of God's love.

What dollar figure would you put on the cost of a resurrection? If you could bring a loved one back from the grave, what would you be willing to pay? When it comes to someone we really love, I suspect we would be willing to give all that we have in order to cheat death.

## THE RESPONSE TO RESURRECTION

But, of course we know that's not possible. Life is not for sale. There is no amount of money that we can pay and nothing that we can do when it comes to the end of life.

When all is said and done, we are helpless when it comes to death.

But, try to imagine that immutable cycle being interrupted. Suppose someone came into our lives that could and did defeat the final enemy? Suppose one of life's great certainties was no longer certain?

How would we respond?

That's the interesting question posed by our lesson for today. Just such a thing has happened. Lazarus had been in the grave four days when Jesus raised him from the dead.

This was not someone who recovered from a near death experience. This was a person who had been in the grave so long that when Jesus asked them to roll away the stone, they hesitated because well ... the smell of decaying flesh would have been overwhelming.

But, you know the story. Jesus said in a loud voice,  
"Lazarus, come forth."

And he came forth, still bound head and foot in his grave clothes.

In John's gospel, the raising of Lazarus is a pivotal event. The smell of decaying flesh is replaced with the sweet smell of salvation. And everyone is left with a big question. What does this mean? What's going to happen next?

The religious authorities think that they know what's going to happen. Jesus is going to become even more popular. In fact he's going to be so popular that it's going to be dangerous for their country. The people will want to make Jesus a king, and there will be no stopping them now.

The Romans, of course, would not be impressed even by a resurrection, and they will put a bloody stop to it all.

One man might have been raised from the dead, but many more will be put in a grave if this Jesus is not stopped now. So they decide to kill Jesus and Lazarus as soon as possible. It's better to sacrifice a few innocent men than to let the whole country be destroyed. (John 11:48-57)

## THE HIGH COST OF SALVATION

What is the cost of salvation? In this case it seems like salvation might even cost Jesus his life. Those who follow Christ should know this from the very beginning. Love is expensive. It costs everything, even our lives. Love means taking up a cross and following him.

Of course, Jesus had told his disciples as much many times before, but they didn't listen. They couldn't listen because they had no frame of reference. Nothing like this had ever happened before.

What was all this talk about dying and rising from the dead? What kind of Messiah does something like that? How can you win a military victory from a cross? It didn't make sense.

We know that Jesus wasn't talking about a military victory. He was talking about a spiritual victory. He was talking about a kingdom that would outlast the Jews and the Romans. He was talking about a hope that was eternal, a hope that could transcend even the grave.

But, the disciples would have none of it. They couldn't conceive of life beyond this life. They couldn't conceive of a power greater than the power of Rome and the Sanhedrin. They were practical men. They were realists who knew that real power was political power.

Leave all this unrealistic talk about sacrificial love to the women. They know about sacrifice. They are the ones required to sacrifice in our society. We know about real power and what it takes to make your way in the world. We're men.

## THE SWEET SMELL OF SALVATION

And maybe that's why a woman is the first to grasp to the true nature of the kingdom of God as revealed in Jesus. Mary, in a small way, knows about the power of sacrifice. And she has gotten just a "whiff" of a sweet kingdom in which the "good old boy" rules will no longer apply.

Salvation will not come by the power of a political victory. Salvation will come when a stone is rolled away, and the smell of death is replaced with the sweet smell of life eternal.

The Bible talks about us needing "eyes to see" and "ears to hear." I would suggest that today's lesson also requires us to have "noses to smell!"

My dogs live in a world that I cannot even imagine. Their sense of smell is many times more powerful than mine. They can smell fear. They can smell food cooking several blocks down the street. They can smell the scent of an intruding animal. Their sensitivity to smell allows them to find things that we could never find.

There's even a Standard Schnauzer being studied by the folks at FSU who can smell the scent of cancer in hospitalized patients. Some of you may have heard about the dog named Gandolf who was able to track and rescue a lost boy scout in North Carolina.

Compared to our canine friends we do not have noses to smell. We are largely unaware of the scents that surround us. And in a spiritual sense we are also insensitive to the sweet smell of salvation as revealed in Jesus Christ.

If we want a whiff of salvation we still search for it in the sweet smell of political victory or (as was true in Judas' case), we search for salvation in the smell of money. But, Mary teaches us to seek the smell of salvation in the most unlikely of places, the graveyard.

## A DINNER INTERRUPTED

Can you imagine the scene at dinner that night? I've been at many meals after a funeral. We remember the deceased and give thanks for their life.

But, what do you talk about when the formerly deceased is at the dinner table as an honored guest?

No amount of small talk will let you forget what has just happened. Surely they were grateful that Lazarus was with them, but I have to wonder if there was a bit of uncertainty and fear as well. How do you celebrate a resurrection?

You remember the story of Martha being busy serving while Mary listens at the feet of Jesus. Well, Martha once again is doing her thing in the kitchen, serving the guests who are there.

And once again Mary shows that she has a “nose” for all things spiritual. Once again Mary is at the feet of Jesus. But, this time she does more than listen. She takes a jar of very expensive aromatic oils, anoints Jesus’ feet and then rubs it in with her hair. The Bible tells us that the whole house was filled with the smell of that expensive ointment.

Now what’s wrong with this picture? According to the cultural norms of the day, almost everything is wrong.

First, women didn’t let their hair down or touch a man’s feet with their hair. At least proper women didn’t do that. Second, if you were going to anoint someone with expensive perfume, you anointed their head, not their feet. And finally, this was a really big waste of money.

WHAT A WASTE!

Judas picked up on the last point. He asked, “Do you know how much money you’ve just wasted? I’ve got a calculator here. Let me see, yes just as I suspected. That perfume would have fed a family of four for a year. Why didn’t you sell it and give the money to the poor? That would have been a much better use of the money. I’m sickened by the smell of such waste.”

On the face of it Judas has a point. It does seem like a waste of precious resources. And Jesus, like most pious Jews was very concerned about the poor. Jesus even said that when we care for the poor, it’s as if we have done

it for him. In the presence of the downtrodden we experience the presence of Jesus.

But, John reminds us that Judas is using a feigned concern for the poor as camouflage for his true feelings. Judas doesn't really care about the poor; Judas cares about Judas.

According to John's gospel, Judas was the treasurer of the disciples and he was in the habit of helping himself to a significant portion of the till. Judas lied to himself so long about what was right and what was wrong that he no longer knew the difference between right and wrong.

And so, when Judas witnessed an act of pure love, he could see only waste. You see, the warped mind has a warped view of the world.

We need to be suspicious of our own motives. If we are very critical of others, and especially if we impute unworthy motives to loving actions, we should smell a rat. We should stop examining the other person's motives and start examining our own.

## THE WONDROUS CROSS

Jesus tells Judas, "Let her alone. She's anticipating and honoring the day of my burial. [8] You always have the poor with you. You don't always have me." John 12:7-8 (MsgB)

It's a good thing to be thrifty, to be responsible stewards of the resources that God has given us. But, sometimes circumstances require us to throw caution to the wind and give all that we have to the Lord in a display of affection and joy. This was one such time.

Mary's action reminds me of the hymn, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." The last verse goes, "Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small; love so amazing so divine, Demands my soul, my life, my all."

Mary got an early glimpse of that amazing, divine love. And it called forth devotion in her that filled the whole house with the sweet aroma of her extravagant love.

Mary understood what the others missed.  
And I think that Mary serves as an example for us all.  
She teaches us that true love is expensive and extravagant.

## A TALE OF TWO PLEDGES

A man told of going on an every member canvass for his church's stewardship campaign. One person that they were scheduled to visit was a chief development officer for a major charity.

This man made his living encouraging others to be good stewards so they thought his visit would be a piece of cake. Surely this man would respond to the church's call with great generosity.

Unfortunately, it didn't work out that way.

In fact, the guy didn't even let the committee members in the door. Instead, he opened the front door about an inch, took the pledge card through the crack, scribbled a pittance on it and then pulled the door closed with "a crisp and final snap."

Fortunately, the next visit was not so discouraging. They visited an elderly lady on a fixed income. She and her striped cat lived modestly in a furnished apartment. When they told her they were from the church, she invited them in for a chat and during the conversation talked about all the church meant to her.

When the time came to pass the pledge card, she joyfully took it and increased her pledge for the coming year. They knew it would mean sacrifice for her.

I suspect those of you who have been on these door to door stewardship campaigns have similar stories to tell. Quite often generosity and devotion

come from unlikely candidates while those that you thought would be generous are rather stingy.

Some people understand that love is expensive, and they are willing to pay the price. Some people are able to survey the wondrous cross and understand the overwhelming cost of salvation.

And others are dull to the amazing grace that surrounds our lives.

### FOXHOLE CHRISTIANS

From time to time I run into someone who has prayed fervently for some miracle in their life. Perhaps a friend or family member needs to be healed. At the time they are willing to do anything or give anything for that salvation.

And it happens. The healing comes as a sign of that coming kingdom where there will be no more suffering or pain.

The person may live differently for a while, but after a few months they seem to forget. They go back to their old ways. The fervent search for salvation is replaced by a more mundane search. The search for life is replaced once again with merely making a living.

Their love for God grows cold. Their devotion awaits the interruption of yet another tragedy. That can happen. Love can grow cold.

### LOVE GROWN COLD

Have you ever been in love? Have you ever cared for a person so much that you were willing to go anywhere and do anything for them?

If that hasn't happened to you, I hope it will one day.

When you're in love, money is no object. In fact you will foolishly give up everything you have for the one you love.

But, sometimes the extravagance of love cools over the years. Over the years we sometimes forget how important love can be.

Couples grow apart as they seek their own goals. Money or personal fulfillment becomes more important than devotion, and the end result is sometimes the betrayal of the one who loves you most.

Today's lesson teaches us that this can happen in our spiritual life as well. We can say that we love our Lord, but we can have other loves that are more important to us.

We tell ourselves a thousand little lies and soon we begin to believe our own stories. We attribute noble motives to our lifestyle. We say that we're doing it all for the Lord.

But, the truth will come out in the end.  
It always does.

What does it take to restore a broken relationship? What does it take to (as the Psalmist put it) "restore the joy" of our salvation? (Psalm 51:12) The Bible tells us that it involve confessing our sin, dying to the old way of life and resolving to walk in the new way that Christ will show us.

In the book of Revelation a church is criticized because their love has grown cold. John's vision tells them that they had "abandoned" the love they had at first.

But, his vision also gives them a way to come back home. They are encouraged to "remember from what [they] had fallen; repent and do the works [they] did at first." (Revelation 2:4-5)

## SALVATION FOR JUDAS

We had a long discussion about Judas in our Bible study this past week. People wanted to know if Judas could have been forgiven even though he betrayed Jesus for money.

The answer is yes. That sin could have been forgiven, but Judas didn't seek forgiveness. Judas didn't repent. Judas didn't seek to go in a different direction.

And so Judas isolated himself from the source of salvation.  
Judas was a victim of his own self-deception.

One commentator noted that Judas' life had become a lie and that the devil entered him through his lies. (John 13:27) Satan is the father of lies, and a lying character opens the door to his influence.

The first step away from that influence is to tell ourselves the hard truth we don't want to hear and throw ourselves on the mercy of Almighty God.

My friend has your love for God grown cold? Do you want to restore the joy of God's salvation? Are you willing to be extravagant in the way you love the Lord? Are you willing to give him everything in his service?

Love is expensive.

But, living without God's love can be even more costly.

I invite you today to enjoy the sweet smell of salvation at the feet of Jesus.

Amen.