

## Pastor's Message – 4/3/2022 John 12:1-8

It seems earlier and earlier when Christmas ads begin to appear. As Valentine's Day approaches, the ads appear again. They are the ads for jewelers and for the rings, bracelets, necklaces, and pins, and all the other jewelry that men are encouraged to purchase and give to the special woman in their lives. It might be Jared or Zale's or Chalmer's or Gysber's. . .or any other of a number of jewelry sellers. And of course, the bigger the better – the flashier the better – the brighter the better.

The ad agencies that produce those ads have made millions convincing the average consumer that if you really love someone, you will spend three months' salary or more on a diamond engagement ring or some other bauble. We've heard this message often enough to have accepted that a diamond really is forever.

However, expressing extravagant love is not a new message. Mary had it figured out long before the diamond industry.

The author of the gospel of John offers us today the contrast between two very different responses to Jesus by his disciples – and both Judas and Mary are disciples. In the male-dominated culture of Jesus' time, Mary is a most unlikely model of true discipleship, but that is how she is portrayed. Mary understands who Jesus is and the significance of the events that are taking place. Mary understands, believes, and acts.

In John's gospel, Judas is portrayed as a self-centered, bitter thief. He appears unwilling or unable to appreciate the significance of the moment. In his defense, he's not the only one; others in the gospels, in John's gospel, are predicted to see but not understand.

Mary's act is extravagant and beautiful. "A twelve-ounce jar of perfume made from essence of nard" is no bottle of cheap scent from a discount shop, but a luxury item worth "a year's wages," according to Judas. Judas raises a logical, if difficult, question about the appropriateness of such an extravagant gift. Shouldn't the perfume have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor?

But Jesus defends Mary, and he is quoting from the Bible when He says, "You will always have the poor among you." Perhaps it is a Judas-reading of Jesus' reply to Judas that would lead the wealthy and powerful to say, "The poor you will always have with you. There's nothing we can or should try to do to change that fact, because it is simply inevitable.

Any attempt by the wider culture to address that is a waste of money, time, and energy.” But then Deuteronomy 15:11, from which Jesus’ quote comes from, continues, “That is why I am commanding you to share freely with the poor and with other Israelites in need.”

The undertone of Jesus’ comment could be, “Yes, this perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor, but *would* it have? If you had an extra three hundred denarii in your hands right now, would you give it to the poor? Is that really where it would end up?”

I’ve always been aware of environmental issues and, as I prepared for this sermon today, I came across some statistics on waste.

According to Mother Jones magazine a few years ago, Americans:

- throw away 106,000 aluminum cans every 30 seconds,
  - distribute one million plastic cups on U.S. airline flights every six hours,
  - go through two million plastic beverage bottles every five minutes,
  - discard 426,000 cell phones every day,
  - use 60,000 plastic bags every five seconds,
  - use fifteen million sheets of office paper every five minutes
- and
- produce 170,000 Energizer batteries every 15 minutes.

Americans discard enough aluminum to rebuild our entire commercial air fleet every three months — and aluminum represents less than one percent of our solid waste stream. We toss 14 percent of the food we buy at the store. More than 46,000 pieces of plastic debris float on each square mile of ocean.”

In spite of those facts, Jesus seems aware that most people resist waste. In fact, we seem almost hard-wired that way. We give a child an expensive toy for Christmas, and he has a wonderful time playing with ... the box the toy came in. Rather than rejoicing in the child’s pleasure, we’re bothered that the toy itself is unloved. *What a waste*, we think, even if we don’t say it. *We could have just brought him an empty box*. We have similar reactions to leftover food, and to clothing being thrown into the wash after being worn for only an hour. Some of us even have trouble discarding items that are meant to be disposable after one usage.

In spite of a tendency to resist waste, Mary anoints Jesus’ feet with expensive perfume and in a powerfully intimate moment, massages the perfume into His tired feet with her hair. However, this act of boldness

and sensuality was not as offensive to Judas Iscariot as the cost of Mary's gift. Jesus tells us her act is "in preparation for my burial." Anointing the dead was a common burial practice in that time, but Jesus, who seems to know what is coming, accepted this anointing as an act before the fact. As far as Jesus is concerned, Mary's gift is one of extravagant love, not of wasted perfume.

Our story today and Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son last week both lift up the idea of extravagant love. Judas has to make what Mary did today into a bad thing, instead of saying, "She gets something here that we don't." But that's the whole point. Mary understands something and acts on something that all the rest of the disciples don't get. Everyone else thinks she's a nut. Or they focus on what they perceive to be the sensuality or sexuality of it and say, "You know what kind of woman she is!"

One of the things we can sometimes lose over time is the ability to be extravagant. As you get older, you're much more aware of trying to be appropriate in your actions; you think about the potential cost, whether it's a good investment of our time and/or money, instead of saying, "This is what I am going to do." And there's both good and bad in that. But I think our passage today invites us to say, sometimes, "Who cares if it's 'inappropriate?'" The story of Mary "wasting" the perfume in anointing Jesus' feet today is talking about actions of the heart for God.

Mary may be throwing caution to the wind, "I don't care about anything else, except this connection with Jesus. Forget about everything else. I want this relationship with Jesus at the cost of everything."

Sometimes Christians will define Christianity as "a practice," usually involving a set of disciplines, including prayer, Bible reading, meditation, Sabbath keeping, tithing, hospitality, deeds of charity and other acts of discipleship. Those are good things, and I recommend them. But sometimes we just have to focus on loving Jesus.

There is so much in our passage for today. We could talk about the act of intimacy of Mary toward Jesus and the scandal. We could talk about the extravagant waste of such an expensive perfume. We could talk about Judas and his character and his attitude. We could talk about Jesus' impending death. But there can be times to stop thinking and just pour oneself out on behalf of Christ and for those whom He loves: to forget our comfort levels and commit our whole selves to loving and worshipping God.

In a new day of hybrid worship, when I and others are very much

aware of people worshipping off-site, who may click on our worship service and then scroll past after 3 seconds, our Sunday worship needs to be less about the head, less about watching the clock, less about following the bulletin from A to B to C and all the way to the end and more about opening our hearts and souls to the presence and invitation of God to immerse our whole selves in His love. It's about welcoming the prayers of anyone who is gathered for worship, whether they are praises or thanks or petition or needs for themselves or others. It is less about watching the clock and wanting to get on to the next thing of our day and more about losing ourselves in the awesome wonder of a lovingly extravagant God. Worship isn't worship if it is merely utilitarian.

The perfume that Mary "wasted" on Jesus could have been sold and the money given to the poor. The same could be argued regarding the cross. Would it not have been beneficial if Jesus had continued His ministry for many more years? Why the necessity of the cross at this point? Why the extravagance of the cross as a way to reveal God's love for us all?

Because the cross is forever.

Theologian Paul Tillich has dubbed such extravagance as Mary shows "Holy Waste." He says Christians should exercise reasonableness and ethical efficiency when using our physical resources. We need to give where and how it will do the most good. Yet, Christian faith must also express itself in an extravagance that seems wasteful.

Our "wasteful" response to God is because of God's wasteful gift of grace toward us, pressed down, shaken together, and spilling over onto our laps. God seeks the lost, who are as valuable as the one coin in ten, the one sheep in one hundred, or the one son of two. God's gracious concern for us must result in our life of grateful service that can appear wasteful to those yet untouched by God's costly love.

How do we become witnesses of life in a world of death?

Mary shows us here. And Jesus ratifies it. When we see signs of life, we celebrate them, lavishly, with whatever we have at hand. When we see signs of God's kingdom, we rejoice. We are called to be holy, extravagant, prodigal – to rehash a term from last week - and even wasteful in our worship and love of God.

In your word and in your actions, followers of Jesus are called to tell the good news of God's saving love and Jesus' redeeming sacrifice on our behalf. Let everyone who sees and knows you know you as one grateful for the love of God and extravagant in sharing it.