

The Fifth Sunday of Lent  
March 13, 2016

*"An Extravagant Love"*  
by Mary Anne Biggs

Philippians 3:4b-14 ~ John 12:1-8

A few years ago there was a true story about a man in New York City who was kidnapped. His kidnapers called his wife and asked for a \$100,000 ransom. She talked them down to \$30,000. The story had a happy ending ... the man was returned home unharmed ... the money was recovered ... and the kidnapers were caught and sent to jail. But, don't you wonder what happened when the man got home and found that his wife got him back for a discount? Calvin Trillin reported on this story. He imagined out loud what the negotiations must have been like: "\$100,000 for that old guy? You have got to be crazy. Just look at him! Look at that stomach! You want \$100,000 for that? You must be kidding. Give me a break here. \$30,000 is my top offer."

I suppose there are some here this morning that might identify with the wife in that story, but I find myself identifying with the husband. I'd like to think if I were in a similar situation, John would spare no expense to get me back. He wouldn't haggle over the price. He wouldn't say, 'Well, let me think about it.' I like to think that he would say, "I'll do anything for her." And I'm pretty sure if he was leaning the other way that our daughter Mary Cate would straighten him out pretty quickly. She's awfully good at that! The point of that story is this ... sometimes it's important to be extravagant! And that is precisely what this story in the Gospel of John is all about.

Jesus is on his way to the cross. It is just a few days before Passover. The chief priests and scribes are plotting against him. Judas is about ready to betray him. The crucifixion is less than a week away and Jesus knows it. Jesus and his disciples stop at Bethany. Just days before, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead right there in Bethany. Now, as they are having dinner, a woman comes to Jesus and does a beautiful but extravagant thing for our Lord. The Gospel of John tells us that the woman was Mary, (the sister of Martha and Lazarus). Mary brings an alabaster jar of pure nard and pours it on his feet. Then she wipes his feet with her hair.

Almost every detail of this story breaks the social boundaries of the day. First, she loosens her hair in a room full of men, which an honorable woman never does. Then she pours perfume on Jesus' feet, which is also not done. The head, maybe ... people do that to kings ... but not the feet. Then she touches him ... a single woman rubbing a single man's feet ... also not done, not even among friends. Then she wipes the perfume off with her hair ... totally inexplicable ... the bizarre end to an all-around bizarre act.

Why on earth did she do that? Most of us are so moved by the scene that we overlook its eccentricities, or else we don't care. The point is that she loved him, right? Right. But we also confuse this account with three others in the Bible ... one each from Matthew, Mark and Luke. In the first two, an unnamed woman anoints Jesus' head at the house of Simon the Leper

during the last week of his life. In the third story, the scene happens at Simon the *Pharisee's* house, much earlier in Jesus' ministry. There Jesus is eating supper when a notorious sinner slips into the room and stands weeping over his feet, then drops to the ground to cover them with kisses before rubbing them with oil of myrrh.

Only in John's version of the story does the woman have a name ... Mary ... and a relationship with Jesus ... not a stranger ... not a notorious sinner ... but his long-time friend ... which makes her act all the more peculiar. He knows she loves him. He loves her too. So why this public demonstration ... this odd pantomime in front of all their friends? It's extravagant. It's excessive. She's gone overboard, as Judas is quick to note.

Jesus responds, "Leave her alone." "She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me" ... which is about as odd a thing for him to *say* as what Mary *did*. Here is the champion of the poor ... always putting their needs ahead of his ... suddenly reversing course. *Leave her alone. Leave me alone. Just this once, let her look after me, because my time is running out.*

And Jesus' remark, "you always have the poor with you," has often been misconstrued and misused by the haves in discouraging social responsibility to the economically vulnerable. Jesus is not advocating for social injustice ... he is affirming the importance of expressing love in the present moment. Beauty and justice are not antagonistic to one another. In fact, the quest for justice is about beauty of experience ... poetry and art ... playfulness and wonder ... as well as full stomachs and adequate housing. Alfred North Whitehead proclaims that the aim of the universe is toward the production of beauty. Mary was adding to the beauty of the universe and God's experience by her act of loving generosity. Her affirmation of the "beauty of holiness" is an example for all relationships ... loving in the present moment transforms our lives and the lives of those around us.

Whatever Mary thought about what she did ... and whatever anyone else in the room thought about it ... Jesus took it as a message from God ... not the hysteric ministrations of an old maid gone sweetly mad, but the carefully performed act of a prophet. Barbara Brown Taylor writes that "*Everything around Mary smacked of significance ... Judas, the betrayer, challenging her act ... the flask of nard—was it left over from Lazarus' funeral? ... and out in the yard, a freshly vacated tomb that still smelled of burial spices, waiting for a new occupant. The air was dense with death, and while there may at first have been some doubt about whose death it was, Mary's prophetic act revealed the truth*"

Yes, she considers Mary a prophet. Mary was anointing Jesus for his burial, and while her behavior may have seemed strange to those standing around, it was no more strange than that of the prophets who went before her ... Ezekiel eating the scroll of the Lord as a sign that he carried the word of God around inside of him (Ezekiel 2) ... or Jeremiah smashing the clay jar to show God's judgment on Judah and Jerusalem (Jeremiah 19) ... or Isaiah walking around naked and barefoot as an oracle against the nations (Isaiah 20). Prophets do things like that. They act out. They act out the truth that no one else can see, and those standing around either write them off as nuts or fall silent before the disturbing news that they bring from God.

When Mary stood before Jesus with that pound of pure nard in her hand, it could have gone either way. She could have anointed his head and everyone there could have proclaimed him a king. But she did not do that. When she moved toward him, she dropped to her knees instead and poured the perfume on his feet, which could only mean one thing. The only man who got his feet anointed was a dead man, and Jesus knew it. "Leave her alone," he said to those who would have prevented her. *Let her finish delivering the message.*

So Mary rubbed his feet with perfume so precious that its sale might have fed a poor family for a year ... an act so lavish that it suggests another layer to her prophecy. There will be nothing economical about this man's death, just as there has been nothing economical about his life. In him, the extravagance of God's love is made flesh. In him, the excessiveness of God's mercy is made manifest.

This bottle will not be held back to be kept and admired. This precious substance will not be saved. It will be opened ... offered and used ... at great price. It will be raised up and poured out for the life of the world ... emptied to the last drop. Before that happens, Jesus will gather his friends together one last time. At another banquet ... around another supper table ... with most of the same people present ... Jesus will strip, tie a towel around his waist, and wash his disciples' feet. Then he will give them a new commandment ... Love one another, as I have loved you.

At least one of the disciples will argue with him, while others will wonder if *he* has lost his mind. But a few will watch him working on their feet and remember Mary bending over *his* feet like that ... the prophet Mary ... who knew how to respond to Jesus without being told ... the one who acted out his last, new commandment before he ever said it. Remembering *her* may help *them* leave *him* alone while he finishes delivering *his* message.

At home in Bethany, the storm clouds are still piling up against the door when Mary gives the forecast ... it will be bad, very bad, but that's no reason for Jesus' friends to lock their hearts and head to the cellar. Whatever they need, there will be enough to go around. Whatever they spend, there will be plenty left over. There is no reason to fear running out ... of nard ... or of life either one ... for where God is concerned, there is always more than we can ask or imagine ... gifts from our lavish, lavish Lord.

In the epistle for this week, Paul says that nothing compares to the reciprocal giving and receiving of God's overflowing goodness: "Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection of the dead."

No, we haven't attained this, Paul admits. And to his radical aspirations he adds a realistic "somehow." But Mary shows us the way. In response to God's infinite goodness, we offer must offer our unbounded gratitude. "I will take what you give," Mother Teresa once prayed, "and I will give what you take."

May we pray?

Ever living God, extravagant love like that of Mary, is the kind of love to which we are called. Indeed it is the kind of love that Jesus himself showed us, when he, on the day after Mary anointed his feet and dried them with her hair, rode into Jerusalem and gave himself up to death on a cross. May he, your beloved Son, inspire us, your beloved children, so that by our witness to him all may know the power of his forgiveness and the hope of his resurrection. Amen.