

READING FROM THE GOSPELS: John 12:1-8

Extravagance

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Several years ago while still a student over at the seminary, I was a part of a group of students with faculty adviser who found themselves in the middle of Central America. For three weeks we immersed ourselves in the culture and religion of that region ... looking at our faith through the eyes of other people.

One of the countries we visited was Nicaragua ... a country that just a few years before my visit was embroiled in a horrible civil war. But peace had finally settled in the region and I found the country to be so beautiful and its people to be some of the most hospitable folks I've ever met.

While in the capital of Managua, we visited a barrio, a huge impoverished neighborhood made up of tin and cardboard homes ... raw sewage in the streets ... and naked little children running and dodging the debris in the streets. The smell was overpowering. We made our way to a small little open air building with chairs arranged in a circle.

And it was there that three women in brightly colored dresses who lived in the barrio met us with trays of Pepsi Colas. They came up to each one of us ... and offered the Pepsi ... as a way of welcoming us to their neighborhood. The cost of these simple welcoming gifts ... something we'd just take for granted in the States ... was more than these women made in a week. But it was an extravagance from their hearts ... to us.

However, one member of our group refused her Pepsi. We all looked surprised when she told them no. Even if she was allergic to soft drinks, she should have at least taken it and thanked the women. But she just stood there and told us that she didn't drink Pepsi ... only Coke. The women just smiled and moved on to another grateful recipient.

Later, in our small group discussion, that young woman revealed that her family was heavily invested in Coca Cola and she couldn't conceive of drinking a Pepsi. The conversation became quite lively after her admission.

In our Gospel reading this morning, another disciple refuses to embrace an extravagant gift that is given to Jesus Christ. He ... like the young woman in Nicaragua ... did not understand the gift being offered ... the extravagant waste being poured out in the name of the Lord.

Anyone with ears to hear ... listen to our reading from the gospel of John, chapter 12, verses 1-8. I will be reading from Eugene Peterson's translation of the Bible, *The Message*.

1 Six days before Passover, Jesus entered Bethany where Lazarus, so recently raised from the dead, was living.

2 Lazarus and his sisters invited Jesus to dinner at their home. Martha served. Lazarus was one of those sitting at the table with them.

3 Mary came in with a jar of very expensive aromatic oils, anointed and massaged Jesus' feet, and

then wiped them with her hair. The fragrance of the oils filled the house.

4 Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples, even then getting ready to betray him, said, 5 "Why wasn't this oil sold and the money given to the poor? It would have easily brought three hundred silver pieces."

6 He said this not because he cared two cents about the poor but because he was a thief. He was in charge of their common funds, but also embezzled them.

7 Jesus said, "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."

9 Word got out among the Jews that he was back in town. The people came to take a look, not only at Jesus but also at Lazarus, who had been raised from the dead.

10 So the high priests plotted to kill Lazarus 11 because so many of the Jews were going over and believing in Jesus on account of him.

This is the Word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

It's like the Last Supper before the Last Supper. The next scene in our story will take place next week when Jesus rides upon a donkey into the Holy City. It's now just six days from the Passover meal and Jesus has just performed the one miracle that outshines all the other miracles ... Lazarus ... laid to rest in a tomb ... has been raised from the dead and is now reclining at his own dining table eating a meal with his sisters and Jesus and his disciples.

Throughout the meal you can see people peering through the windows as word of the resurrection spreads throughout the region. "Look ... that's Lazarus ... I was at his funeral. I saw him buried in the tomb. And look ... he's sitting there looking fit as a fiddle and eating his supper. Can you believe it?" This story is actually occurring on many levels ... the high priest even sets into the motion a plan to kill Jesus before this gets out of hand. But that's another story.

The story that intrigues me is happening there in Lazarus' dining room. Jesus knew where he was heading ... he knew what the end of his journey to Jerusalem would bring ... but here, in the cool night air ... no one is thinking about those crazy words he said about what was going to happen ... because this probably changed everything.

Now that he's raising the dead ... he doesn't have to die ... the people will all get behind him ... the revolution will begin ... and the people will be free with a new King to lead them. Or so they thought. After all ... you don't die to achieve success ... now do you?

I wonder if anyone notices Mary slipping away from the table? Do you? I wonder who first notices a sweet fragrance ... just a brief whiff carried on the breeze ... I wonder who is watching Mary as she kneels down before Jesus with a jar? What's she going to do? And then ... with the gentleness of a graceful spring bloom ... she pours the sweet ointment ... burial ointment ... over the feet of Jesus

and then begins to wipe them with her hair. Now that's a conversation stopper if I ever saw one.

Precious nard ... expensive nard ... extravagant nard ... a year's wages worth of nard ... poured over the feet of the Messiah. No one says a word ... no one except Judas ... who vehemently complains that the perfume should have been sold and the money given to the poor. Of course ... the author of John tells us that Judas has other intentions for the money.

You just don't waste things that can be kept ... things that should be hoarded ... things that you just gotta have to survive in that jungle out there ... after all Judas could have used that money to take a trip into the city for a night on the town ... or maybe to gamble on the chariot races ... or to just keep back for a rainy day ... wasting money to Judas would be like me standing up here before you with a \$1,000 bill and setting it on fire and telling you I'm offering a fragrant offering to the Lord.

I can hear your cries. "How wasteful! How could he do such a thing? Burning a \$1000? We need that money ... we don't have money to burn!" "But it's an offering to the Lord" I would tell you. An offering meant solely for the Lord. Is there anything wrong with giving the Lord something costly ... something worthy to the one who has given me my very life and salvation?"

And then we would argue some more ... some of you would take the stand of Judas ... and decry what I did ... and some of you might say, "Well ... I guess it would be ok" ... but I suspect most of you would be like those other disciples around that dining table ... unable to say anything ... on the one hand ... you're afraid of losing the money ... but on the other hand ... you wonder why Jesus said it was OK."

Just a fragrant gesture ... a simple gift ... yes, true ... an extravagant gift ... a bottle of perfume to anoint someone before they are buried ... a few bottles of Pepsi Cola given to welcome some strangers ... it was costly to Mary ... it was costly to those Nicaraguan women ... but none counted the cost ... one anointed the Lord ... the others welcomed strangers into their midst ... and both times God was praised and glorified.

That got me thinking this week ... we're just about at the same point in the story we just read ... we're one week away from celebrating Palm Sunday. So I thought, wouldn't it be really special to praise God ... to glorify God in some special way ... something that would make the world stand on its head and wonder about us as much as Judas wondered about Mary? You know ... really make a statement of our love of Jesus Christ. I began to wonder what we could do?

I don't know any store that sells Nard ... though you can order it online for about \$50 an ounce ... but we certainly don't need to anoint Jesus again ... so I was sure there must be something else we could do. Now I suspect that Mary's gift cost her every penny she had available. And I know those Pepsis costs those women all they had. That's when a light bulb went off in my head ... why don't we do something like that?

Why don't we glorify God by opening up the purse of our church ... on Sunday morning ... and give all the money in our checking account to the Glory of God ... maybe we could give it to the homeless children at Our House ... or to the women and children at Hagar's House ... or maybe, I thought, we could even share our ideas this morning and take a vote on how we could spend our extravagant gift ... every penny this church has available at this very moment.

I felt elated ... not only would we read about an extravagant gift ... we could give one! Well maybe. You see ... I was also hit with a hard reality later in the week. We just don't have much left in our purse. As a matter of fact ... we have a grand total of \$46 right now sitting in the church's purse ... our checking account. I suppose we could buy a few cases of Pepsi with that ... but right now, we can't even afford an ounce of Nard.

Now I need to make it quite clear ... we don't have a Judas stealing from our church's purse. As a matter of fact, we have a team of dedicated Finance Ministry members ... disciples ... who have been working very hard with our Session on how we are to tackle this ongoing financial problem faced by Columbia.

You see, the reality is that we have too much building for a church our size. We just can't continue to maintain two huge buildings ... it costs too much money to keep them going ... boiler repairs ... maintenance ... new flooring ... roofs ... as well as the important stuff ... the mission this church does here.

So ... we have a choice ... we can put the Nard back up on the shelf ... not waste anything ... not risk giving too much to the Lord ... and find some other place to be a church ... a church that is more concerned about what is in its purse than trusting what God can do in the life of the church. That's one way. The other way ... we can keep right on pouring that Nard upon the feet of Jesus.

We can keep doing extravagant things here at Columbia. We can keep risking it all for the glory of God ... by continuing to follow God's will who has called us to do ministry and mission here in Decatur, Ga. Why should we do that? Quite simply ... because we are God's beacon of hope and compassion and love and grace in this part of Decatur.

Just ask the 300 people who are now part of the Food Co-ops we helped create and support over on Memorial Drive ...

- Ask that little lady who's house was repaired here in Decatur by members of this church ...
- Ask the 80 homeless families that depend on Our House to teach and feed their young children every week ...
- Ask the homeless families of Hagar's House who depend on that vital mission for survival ...
- Ask the scores of people we help individually with spiritual support and aid for all kinds of things from groceries to utilities to rent ...
- Ask the neighborhood associations who gather here each month to share their concerns and issues ...
- Ask the untold number of men and women whose lives are supported and uplifted through the two AA programs that meet here at Columbia every week ...
- Ask the young girls of the three Girl Scout troops who meet here every week ...
- Ask the youth of this church who are mentored in their Spiritual journeys through fellowship and mission opportunities ...
- Ask Hannah Lefton as she prepares to be ordained in a few minutes as the youngest elder in the church ...
- Ask the pioneers of Columbia who grew this church and have supported its work and ministry for almost their entire lives ...
- Ask our newest members who have found a place where they can connect and share in relationships with others as they grow in their spiritual lives ...
- Ask the children of the seminary who have a place to gather and explore their life with Jesus

- Christ through activities and song ...
• Ask the choir members who give of their time and talents to make worship so powerful here at Columbia ...

Ask the missionary families who receive support and love as they labor in the name of Jesus Christ throughout the world ...

Do I need to go on? Well, I could. Because there is even more ... much more that we do here. And that, my friends, is quite extravagant for a church this size. Some would say we are wasteful ... pouring out that kind of love on Jesus Christ ... when we can't afford it. But I'm here to say ... we can't afford not to do it. Because I trust what God is doing and going to do here much more than I trust the worries and the anxieties and fears we may have about our future.

It is the reason I have committed myself to the work and ministry of this church ... it is the reason I'm willing to sacrifice some extra time each week ... and even to sacrifice a portion of my salary and benefits ... to see that God's will is done. It excites me ... it feeds me ... and I pray it does for you, too.

The fact is ... for us to keep on doing what God wants us to do ... your session has recognized that we're going to have to make some changes ... changes that might include consolidating our church into this single sanctuary building ... utilizing our Education building as an asset and as an offering to God ... like a bottle of Nard ... to financially support our ministry and mission here.

But ... we need to always remember ... this church has never been about the buildings ... it's about you and me ... it's about the relationships shared here ... it's about the ministry and mission done here ... and whatever it takes to keep on following God's will ... and doing that ministry and mission ... we will do it. So in the coming weeks and months ... all of you will be asked for both your prayers and your creative input ... as all the various options are explored.

The plain truth is ... we cannot keep on borrowing money from ourselves ... there just isn't anymore ... the purse is just about empty ... and we want to avoid taking on outside debt. We want to do our ministry and mission as God's good stewards ... creative ... extravagant in what we choose to do ... all for the glory of God.

Mary gave her offering out of a deep love for and understanding of Jesus. The other disciples weren't quite there yet, and of course Judas was nowhere near, but Mary really got it—his love for us, the necessity of his death. She was worshiping him, and loving him, and grieving for him—actually anointing his body for burial. That should be our motivation, too – a deep understanding of who Jesus is and what he's done for us, a yearning to serve him because we love him, an overwhelming gratitude.

So let's roll up our sleeves. We're beginning a new and exciting journey here at Columbia. If you are behind in your pledge ... or if you can increase it just a little bit ... or if you can even afford to pay ahead on your pledge this year ... than please do so. It'll help get us over the hump.

But most importantly ... pray ... pray for God's will to be done here at Columbia in all that we do. Trust that God is leading us ...

Let us pray:

Lord, your summons echoes true when you but call my name.
Let me turn and follow you and never be the same.
In your company I'll go ... where your love and footsteps show.
Thus I'll move and live and grow in you ... and you in me.
In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.