

Sermon for Fifth Sunday of Lent
The Rev. Canon Raymond Raney
Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church
Los Alamos, New Mexico
April 3, 2022

Isaiah 43:16-21
Psalm 126
Philippians 3:4b-14
John 12:1-8

Please close your eyes and take a breath.

When I say the word “Extravagant” – what comes to mind?

The dictionary defines extravagant as: “exceeding the limits of reason or necessity.”

What comes to your mind? Spending too much money? Doing too much for yourself? Going out of your way to do something for someone else?

Think on it. What could you do that you’d consider truly extravagant?

As part of my studies in Art History, one of the practices I found fascinating was the “Potlatch” – a gift-giving feast among the tribes of the Pacific Northwest Coast in North America.

Simply put, it was a feast celebrated on various occasions – births, deaths, weddings, etc. – that involved the host of the feast, usually the wealthier elders of the tribe – to give away many if not most of their possessions as gifts to those who attended the feast.

Sometimes the giving away of possessions became a competition among those who hosted the feasts each year to see who could give away the most.

It became so costly that members of the tribes bankrupted themselves proving and outdoing the giving of the previous year.

It was the unlikely competition to be the most generous. In fact, after a number of extravagant feasts that impoverished too many in the mid 1800s the Canadian government outlawed the practice. It wasn’t until the early 1950s that the potlatch was decriminalized.

Extravagance can warrant concern on the part of those who care. I remember shortly after Linda and I were married, my brother showed up at our door to inquire as to how we were both doing.

Now remember, I was not yet a year into my recovery, and Linda and I were heavily involved in the church.

By the way, a point of personal privilege: I celebrate 40 years of recovery tomorrow.

Anyway, it turns out that somehow my mother had heard that Linda and I were giving away ALL of our possessions, and she had sent my brother, who lived in another state, to advise us not to give away all our stuff.

My brother found that the suspected extravagance was actually our process of combining our two households. We had two of most things and needed to decide which we wanted to keep. That just goes to show that extravagance can raise eyebrows. Which brings me to the Gospel today:

“Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 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. ...”

This is an extravagance. Pure and Simple – this gesture is such an extravagance that it defies the imagination.

I want to share the sensory experience of that night with you now so you may know the scent of nard, the fragrance of extravagant love.

The ointment comes from a plant called spikenard, which grows in the Himalayas. That's right, the mountains on the north side of India.

It would have been imported at great expense by caravan from the Far East to the Middle and Near East. It was packaged in alabaster boxes. It was cherished.

What it must have cost. Judas sets the price at 300 denarii. A pound of pure Nard would have cost at least a year's wages.

I can only imagine how long it took for Mary to save up to buy that Nard. She may have used her dowry to buy this gift for Jesus.

Here we are privileged to see the lengths to which Mary of Bethany goes to express her love for Jesus.

All four gospels share stories of women who anoint Jesus:

In Luke a “sinful woman with an alabaster jar” interrupts dinner at the home of a Pharisee, and she anoints Jesus' feet with ointment tears and kisses.

Mark and Matthew tell the story of an unnamed woman who pours perfumed ointment on Jesus' head while he eats at the home of Simon the Pharisee.

In this morning's Gospel, the scene is one of reverence. This is a foreshadowing of what will occur at the close of Good Friday when Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus will wrap the body of Jesus in linen with 100 pounds of myrrh and aloes and place the corpse in the tomb.

Here Mary begins preparing Jesus for his burial.

The scent gives us pause on this inevitable, excruciating journey to the Passover in Jerusalem.

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, How I longed to shelter you as a hen shelters her chicks under my wings.” Jesus would say.

This dinner is in Bethany, a scant three miles from the city that kills the prophets.

The Romans have moved their forces from Tiberias to Jerusalem in preparation for the Passover when Jews from all over the kingdom come to the temple to pray and, perhaps, plot the overthrow of the Empire.

And Jesus will make his way despite the danger to himself and his disciples.

In the previous chapter of John, Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead, and word of this event has traveled to the Jewish leadership.

Now the Scribes and the Pharisees and the Priests meet to conspire to kill Jesus and Lazarus. Some believe Jesus must die because they fear the Romans will destroy the holy places and the nation of Israel.

But Caiaphas, the High Priest, believes Jesus’ death will fulfill his prophecy that Jesus must die to save the nation. Caiaphas tells the plotters:

“You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.” He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God.**

But here and now Jesus pauses on his journey to dine with his friends.

We can imagine candle flames flickering, light glinting off a dish of dates and figs, reflections of the flames in a dish of olive oil – all the remains of a generous meal.

Cups and bowls jostle as Mary returns to the room, and the disciples rise from their places to see what’s happening. Then the room is suddenly filled with a divine fragrance.

And then the extravagance is named and called out, but it’s not Mary’s brother or sister who object, which leads me to believe they approved of Mary’s gift and perhaps joined in its purchase and share in its giving.

No, it’s not family, but the one who the Gospels say will betray Jesus.

“It’s too much,” shouts Judas, “it should be sold and the money given to the poor.” Or more likely, it shouldn’t have been bought in the first place. It is just too much. Too much. Too much.

Here is the contrast of extravagance – Mary and Judas.

Mary chooses to be extravagant in her gift of love to Jesus. She shows us just how extravagant love can be. She offers the most precious thing she owns and spends it all on one gift to Jesus.

She gives us the gift of realizing how extravagant love can be; a love that does not calculate the cost, a love that only regrets that it doesn't have more to give.

Judas, however, shows us how miserly it is to withhold the love he has to give. His concern is not for the poor, the Scripture tells us, but for what he has the opportunity to steal.

There is an excess here, an excess of want; an extreme deficit to show us just how little one will ask to line one's pockets to betray a friend.

Thirty pieces of silver – the price Judas places on his soul - the deficit price of a betrayal – one tenth of the price of Mary's love.

So many years have passed between that evening in Bethany when the fragrance of Mary's gift scented the feet of our Savior and filled the Universe with the delight of a truly extravagant gift.

We will witness another extravagance next Sunday when we join the disciples and Jesus on the journey from the triumphal entry into Jerusalem to the way of sorrows that end at Calvary.

Mary and Martha and Lazarus have joined together to show us the extremes to which friends will go to show the love they share for another.

That extravagant love will multiply on that journey to Jerusalem.

Then we will witness the absolute extravagance of the love that God shares with those who were created in the image of God.

God the Father surrenders God the Son to the will of fear, greed, jealousy, and spite.

Jesus the Christ extravagantly gives his life so that we may live and move and have our being in the joy of eternity.

Let us pray.

Lord of this feast beyond measure and price; we thank you for meeting us in our brokenness so that none might be lost: Liberate us now to share bread with our neighbor, each receiving from the other what we need to be ourselves.*

Amen.

** The Gospel of John (NRSV), Chapter 11:48-52.

* *Prayers for an Inclusive Church* by Steven Shakespeare; Church Publishing Inc., New York, 2009; p. 154.