

EXTRAVAGANCE
Sermon for Lent 5C—Jn 12:1-8
LPC, 3/17/13

- In 2011, the average annual salary for an NBA player was \$5.15 million dollars.
- Also, in 2011, Americans spent \$10.4 billion on cosmetic surgery, according to the Huffington Post.
- In 2012, the average price of a new car topped \$30,000, for an all-time high.
- Also in 2012, according to the American Pet Products Association, Americans spent at total of \$55.33 billion on pet care.
- When I Googled 20,000 square foot houses this past week, I got over 4 million hits.

I tell you, when I contemplate how much that kind of money would benefit the poor, a lousy bottle of perfume pales in comparison.

I'm referring, of course, to this morning reading from the Gospel of John, where Mary of Bethany washes the feet of Jesus, using a bottle of perfume that cost the equivalent of a laborer's annual wages. Please note that in John's version of the story the woman who washes Jesus' feet is neither Mary Magdalene, nor a notorious sinner. She is the sister of a man whom Jesus raised from the dead.

At any rate, Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve disciples, protests. John makes clear that Judas' motives are anything but pure, but Judas' objection actually seems entirely reasonable. Since Jesus cares about the poor so much, why did he not refuse such extravagance, in solidarity with them? Alternatively, if he did accept the gift, why did he not sell it and feed the poor? Why did he not lecture Mary about her priorities? This could have been a teaching moment!

Well, it *is* a teaching moment, but the lesson is not the one we expect. (That Jesus! He's always surprising people!) Jesus accepts Mary's gift and rebukes Judas, with the enigmatic words, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." What does *that* mean?

To get at that question, let's look at this gift. The perfume clearly means more to Jesus than just a nice smell, or foot massage when he most needs it, or even a present whose great expense connotes a depth of appreciation on the part of the giver.

This perfume is a gift from Mary's heart. It is a gift of love. It is sacrificial on her part. In other words, it is a Christ-like gift. Remember that in a few days Jesus will repeat this very same action, when he gets down on his own knees to wash the disciples' feet the night before he dies. Who knows? Maybe Jesus got the idea from her! Mary's self-sacrificial gift of love prefigures Jesus Christ's own *ultimate* self-sacrificial gift.

Mary has done what she could for the love of her Lord. There is no way she could possibly repay Jesus for bringing her beloved brother back from the dead. But Jesus has

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been extravagant with her and her family, she wants to do something extravagant in return. A bottle of perfume may be an odd choice, but it's something Mary can give extravagantly, so she gives it with her whole heart.

What can you give extravagantly to your Lord? A few of us, through the grace of God, can be extravagant with money. Still more of us could be more extravagant with money to God's purposes than we are if we were slightly less extravagant with money to our own purposes. But there are other ways to be extravagant, and all of us can be extravagant with something. All of us can give God something.

Some may be extravagant with caring and service. Some may be extravagant with skill, or energy, or faithfulness, or prayer. Some are extravagant in their ability to create beautiful things. Still others are extravagant with forgiveness, or hospitality, or maybe even the zucchini from their gardens. By such extravagance is the Kingdom of God served.

Yes, the poor we have always with us. But by being extravagant with what we can be extravagant with, we can help God save the world. No one can solve the problem of poverty. But each of us is called to do what we can. Here is what author Anne Lamott says:

What I believe ... is that Jesus preached a gospel of radical sacrifice, of giving away everything we possibly can – our time, our money, our prayer – to the have-nots, the same old/ same old suffering people of this world, widows and whole nations.

Let us go in peace then, to be people of goodness and service and sacrifice. I keep trying to do better, like most people do, but I don't have a magic wand. I am learning as I go; and boy, am I humbled by my failings. And "humbled" is always a great place to start anything, from being a better parent, writer, mate; or still, after all these years, trying to save the world.

It seems that God's will is that we humans indeed help save the world by doing what we can, all that we can, for the love of God.

If we were all extravagant with what we can be extravagant with, who knows what would happen? If all of us gave what it gives us joy to give, whatever that is, I believe the world would change and swing closer into alignment with God's plan.

Here's the thing. God was first. God's extravagance precedes and dwarfs any extravagance on our part. Last week we heard about the extravagant forgiveness of the father of the Prodigal Son. That was a wonderful prelude to this week, and to the extravagance of Holy Week, coming up soon. Holy Week is about the ultimate extravagance, where God gives God's Son: where Christ gives himself. Talk about extravagance!