

# WESTWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH/MARCH 21, 2010

## WHY THIS WASTE?/JOHN 12:1-8

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### I. THE TEXT

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. Next week will find us with palm branches in hand as he rides, triumphant, into the city. But tonight we are just outside Jerusalem in a small village called Bethany. We, with Jesus and his disciples, have been invited to dinner at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. It will not be an ordinary meal. Hear the word of God, the story of an extravagant gift...

*Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup>There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup>"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" <sup>6</sup>(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) <sup>7</sup>Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup>You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."*

**II. PRAYER:** May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts in this hour, be acceptable in your sight, O God, our rock and our redeemer... Amen.

### III. THE STORY

Lent takes us on an impossible sprint through Jesus' ministry. The first week of Lent finds us at Jesus' baptism and takes us on a 40-day pilgrimage of suffering and temptation in the desert. Jesus' ministry is launched. Over the next 4 Lenten Sundays we fast-forward through 3 years and by the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent, as the story goes, Jesus has crisscrossed Palestine, growing a band of followers, performing the miraculous, teaching the crowds, and loving the unlovely. He has changed water into wine, thrown money changers out of the temple, healed all manner of sick people, forgiven sins, fed thousands from a few loaves of bread and a handful of sardines... he has made outrageous claims about himself... claims that have nearly gotten him killed. Everywhere Jesus goes he talks about an alternative kingdom, a heavenly kingdom that was intended for earth. A kingdom of compassion and justice, a kingdom in which the poor will see God and the meek will inherit the earth.

This morning's text finds us in the suburbs of Jerusalem... the cross looms. Six days before Passover, Jesus and his disciples have come to Bethany for one last dinner party at the home of his dearest friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus. From our vantage point we know that the next morning, Jesus will climb on a donkey and ride into Jerusalem to the cheers, "Hosanna, blessed is the king of Israel!" We know that Jesus' week will go terribly wrong, and then turn wonderfully right. But on this night, no one knows how the week will unfold... that it will hold a garden, a cross, a tomb, and finally, a resurrection.

Weeks, maybe just days earlier, Jesus stood at the tomb that held a lifeless Lazarus – and roared, "Lazarus, come forth!" And that's exactly what Lazarus did – walked out – grave clothes and all. From that moment on, Jesus is a marked man – too powerful, too popular, too threatening – rumblings and rumors and reports that he may well be the long awaited

Messiah. Deemed a threat to the powers that be, the chief priests and Pharisees decide it is time to make their move – it would be best if Jesus went away for good.

It is under that dark cloud that Jesus and his disciples gather for a final supper with his most cherished friends. Martha is in charge of the kitchen – that is no surprise. How do you thank the one who saved your brother's life? I suspect for Martha, it was pouring herself into the elaborate, extravagant preparation of a next-to-the-last-supper. It is the gift she has to give and she gives it generously. Lazarus is reclining at the dining room table with Jesus and the disciples. It seems that dinner is progressing according to Martha's plan, but just as the dishes are being cleared from the table an odd scene unfolds.

Mary enters the room – in her hands she holds a slender clay jar of expensive perfume. Mary says nothing, but moves toward Jesus, to his feet. I imagine all eyes turning her direction, the room falling silent. Mary kneels, breaks off the neck of her jar and proceeds to break every rule of etiquette on the books. She lets down her hair – something no respectable woman would ever do in the company of men. It is a complex moment – in antiquity loose hair not only had sexual connotations, it could also indicate piety, sorrow or thankfulness. The first readers of John's account would find in this moment intimacy, deep emotion and great dedication. Then Mary pours the fragrant perfume on Jesus' feet. She takes her most valuable possession and gives it away... as if to say, in giving you what I most cherish I give you myself... I hold nothing back. She touches his feet – a single woman caressing the feet of a rabbi – a scandalous act. Jesus receives Mary's lavish outpouring of love, perhaps because he knew that in just a few short days he would be giving a lavish, extravagant, outpouring of love himself... he too will wash the feet of those he loves. As Mary broke open her jar and poured out its sweet fragrance, Jesus too will be broken, his life will be poured out... there will be nothing frugal or cheap about Jesus' gift either.

The next person we hear from is Judas – ever the villain in Jesus' story. Judas is indignant. “Jesus, why this waste? Why wasn't this expensive perfume sold and the money given to the poor? An immigrant family could live a year on that much money and she's gone and wasted it on your feet!” Gospel writer John is quick to point out that Judas is the one who will, just a few days down the road betray Jesus for a few pieces of silver... and that his motives were far from right. But this time at least, Judas seems to get the question right. I feel sorry for him here.

Think back over all the times Judas heard Jesus say things like, “sell your possessions and give to the poor,” “whatever you did for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” Judas had heard the parable of the Good Samaritan and watched as the rich young ruler walked away sad because of his great wealth. If we didn't already know how this story unfolds, we'd be delighted because one of Jesus' thick-headed disciples finally seems to get something right. We'd be quite sure that Mary is due a good scolding and Judas ought to get a pat on the back and a commendation for his heart for the poor.

But that is not what happens. “Leave Mary alone,” Jesus replies. “She bought the perfume 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.”

#### IV. THE QUESTION

Perplexing words, are they not? I confess, I can identify with Judas on this one. “After all those words about caring for the poor – are you saying we should **not** sell the perfume and give it to the poor, but rather let Mary waste it on your feet?” It is a sensible question.

Sensible then – and sensible now. We could demand of our ancestors, those who built this beautiful church, installed stained glass rather than clear, bought an organ AND a piano... Why this waste? With homeless to care for? Hungry to feed? Children to love? Why all this waste? An excellent – and ancient – question. We could raise this question of course, about our homes, art museums, theaters, orchestras, choirs and libraries. Why all this waste? What of the poor?

“The poor,” if we may quote Jesus, “we will always have with us” – but only if we take these words wildly out of context could we find any sort of apathy toward the poor, any note of resignation to their suffering. Rather, Jesus is telling the disciples they will have the poor to look after until the end of time – but in this moment, it was utterly appropriate for Mary to show her love in this extravagant way. Caring for the poor and oppressed is in the job description of every follower and every church of Jesus Christ. That is why we are so diligent in our support of PATH and Westside Food Bank... that is why we write Amnesty International postcards. When we are generous toward the poor... when we are doing justice, we are simply living out Christ’s call. It is **not** ok that 1.1 billion people in our world live on less than \$1 a day... that 1 in 5 children in our own country live in poverty. Clearly, this congregation does not take Jesus’ words as a dismissal of our God-breathed obligation. As Christians, we remember that our church budget, our home and federal budgets are all moral documents, and we are committed to deepening our care for the poor and intent on changing systems and attitudes that create such disparity between the haves and the have-nots.

So, then, how **do** we make sense of Jesus’ approval of Mary’s extravagance when that money could have made such a difference to at least some of those “have-nots”? We make sense of it by climbing into Jesus’ world, his culture. In Jesus’ world, they seem to be able to hold things in tension more easily than we western thinkers do. We tend to see things from an “either/or” perspective. Judas’ question reflects such a mindset – either you give to the poor, or you are generous toward God – you cannot have it both ways. But Jesus was not limited by such constraints – this was not “either/or”... it was “both/and.” To the question: “Ought we be generous toward the poor or generous toward God.” Jesus’ answer is a firm “yes.” For him, there is nothing about Mary’s extravagant gift that conflicts with generosity to the poor.

Recall the Levitical law – the same God who insisted that grape vines and olive trees not be re-picked so that there would be enough left for the orphans and the widows – that same God said to Moses, “Have the people make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them,” and then asked the wandering Israelites to pool their gold, silver and bronze, their purple and scarlet yarn, their precious gems and turn them into a tabernacle where God would be worshiped. The same God who demanded that that the edges of the fields be left unharvested so that the strangers and the poor would have enough to eat – that same God delighted when Solomon completed an exquisite temple in Jerusalem, much of it overlaid in gold and silver, and inlaid with every precious stone imaginable. Why this waste?

Could it be that there is a bit of wastefulness in the character of God? Consider creation. Hardly a bare-boned project. Why bougainvillea and jasmine – they do nothing to fill a hungry stomach. Why this waste? Why create people with impulses to compose Requiems and write plays when they could be sowing and reaping? Why chocolate... and cabernet... blueberries and horseradish? Surely all of our nutritional needs could have well been met with bland. Why this waste?

Apparently there are certain sorts of waste God loves. Which brings us back to Mary... Mary and her loving extravagance toward Jesus. She is the one Jesus commends that evening, not Judas. It is to her that we look this morning for an example of faithfulness. Without embarrassment or apology, in a tender and emotional act, Mary takes a precious possession and gives it away... as if to say, in giving you what I cherish, I give you myself... I hold nothing back. Mary, in her over-the-top-love, shows us the way.

But isn't such exuberance in a 21st century post-Enlightenment-modernist-buttoned-down culture a bit much to ask? In his book *The Heart of Christianity*, New Testament scholar Marcus Borg argues that we modernists we have reduced the faith and turned it into "propositional believing" – believing a particular set of statements or claims to be true. He writes, "Prior to the seventeenth century, the word "believe" did not mean believing in the truth of statements or propositions... Grammatically, the object of believing was not statements, but a person. Moreover, the contexts in which it [the notion of believing] is used in premodern English make it clear what it meant: to hold dear; [to believe is] to prize; to give one's loyalty to; to give one's self to; to commit oneself. It meant what *fidelitas* and *fiducia* mean: faithfulness, allegiance, loyalty, commitment, and trust. Most simply 'to believe' meant 'to love.' Indeed, the English words 'believe' and 'belove' are related. What we believe is what we belove. Faith is about loving God."<sup>1</sup>

If we are stingy in our love for God, it is likely we will be stingy in our love for the poor. As we risk extravagantly believing... loving – in the way Borg explains it – we will discover that we have risked everything, and we will not worry about whether to honor God or care for the poor, for we will do both as easily and naturally... as appropriately as we inhale and exhale – and can live without neither.

Mary "beloved" Jesus. She loved him not cheaply or cautiously or prudently, but rather excessively, extravagantly... with her heart wide open. In Mary we see what Christian living looks like. Extravagant love, costly love. Maybe that is the point. Maybe the point of our life with Christ on earth is to grow in our loving. Again in Borg's words, "Faith is about loving God and all that God loves. Faith is our love for God. Faith is the way of the heart."<sup>2</sup> Loving well, like Mary, like Jesus... experiencing the joy of holding nothing back but giving all we have to give. Why this waste? In the words of Trappist monk, Raphael Simon. "To fall in love with God is the greatest of all romances; to seek Him, the greatest adventure; to find Him, the greatest human achievement."

The essence of a well-lived life is pretty simple... in the immortal words of Jesus... "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind... You shall love your neighbor as yourself."<sup>3</sup> It is a simple as that.

**VI. PRAYER:** Lord, as there was nothing frugal or cheap about Mary's gift... may there be nothing frugal or cheap about our own. May we love in the same crazy, outrageous, hold-nothing-back way of Mary... and of Jesus... as did he, may we give all we have to give.

**AMEN AND AMEN.**

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*, p. 40-41.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 22:37-40