

“Extravagant Love”

“Which follower of Jesus do you admire most, or identify with the most?” I was asked this question during my interview for ordination. I answered immediately “Mary of Bethany”.

You remember her. She was the sister of Martha and Lazarus. She was the one who sat spellbound at Jesus’ feet when he spoke in her home, teaching and telling stories. She was the one who was glued to his every word while her sister bustled around getting a meal for everyone. I admire her, and identify with her. In some ways, I am like her.

Yet, in other ways I wish I were more like her. Actually, I have to confess that I identify with Martha, too, sharing many of her attitudes and behaviors. Maybe I think I am more like Martha, really, and wish I could be more like Mary. The stories of the family at Bethany are very precious to me, and today’s reading is one of my favorites.

Last Sunday’s Gospel lesson sets the stage for this story. Remember, it was the parable of the prodigal son. Through that story Jesus paints a picture of what God is like. God is like the father, who rejoices when the lost come home.

Jesus was God in the flesh, God with us, Emmanuel. Keep that in mind as we reflect on this. JESUS was LIKE that father in the parable, who put a beautiful robe, ring and shoes on his wayward son and killed the fatted calf, hosting a party with feasting, music, and dancing—all in celebration of his lost son’s return. That’s what JESUS was like: overflowing with mercy, joy and extravagant love.

Consider this as we think about Mary and her actions. She had met God in Christ. She had experienced God’s extravagant love through him. She was so filled with love in return that it HAD to be expressed in a powerful way.

There is a form of prayer known as “Scripture meditation”. This is a way of reading Scripture not just for the factual content and understanding, but for a deeper experience. This process requires four steps.

First, we read the story just for the facts and events. Then we choose one person in the text and re-read the Scripture, trying to imagine the scene and events as though we ARE that person. Next, we select another person, and read the passage again. Finally, we ask ourselves how Jesus' words and actions in the passage address us in the current situations of our lives.

Let's walk through this process together, with our Gospel lesson for today.

First: the facts of the reading: Jesus knew he was nearing the end of his earthly life. Entering Jerusalem at this point required courage and commitment to God's will. He came to Bethany, a town outside the city's boundaries, where the overflow of visitors for the Passover would often stay. Jesus stopped at the home of his friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus, whom he had raised from death. Martha was serving and the disciples were likely all present.

Mary came to Jesus with a pound of very precious ointment. It may have come from the pistachio nut. Whatever the case, it was an especially valuable kind of perfume. Mary rubbed this fragrant cream on Jesus' feet. Judas questioned her actions, accusing her of being wasteful. Jesus' silenced him by saying money can be given to the poor at any time, but a kindness done to him must be done now, for soon he would no longer be with them in the flesh.

These are the facts of the story. Now, let's imagine ourselves in the reality of that moment as Mary of Bethany.

As I imagine being Mary, I'm aware of several things. First, the depth and power of her love for Jesus. Her love was extravagant. She took the most precious thing she possessed and poured it all on Jesus. She did not count the cost, but gave her all, maybe wishing she had more she could give or do.

Second, her love was characterized by humility. She knelt at Jesus' feet and anointed them. You and I know that feet are not the most lovely part of a person. In Jesus' time people wore sandals and their feet were dusty. Normal hospitality required a host to see that his guests' feet were washed when entering a home. But that task was normally performed by the lowest in rank of the household servants. Mary did not hesitate to embrace that task.

Third, Mary's love was so overpowering that she lost any concern about what people might think of her actions. Mary wiped Jesus' feet with her hair. In that time and culture, no respectable woman would ever appear before others with her hair unbound. But Mary didn't care. She had only eyes for Jesus, and poured out her heart and soul.

Let's turn now to Judas. Judas Iscariot, he was called, which can be translated: *Judas of the short sword*. Judas may have been a zealot. In Christ's time they were known to carry a specific kind of sword that could be easily concealed. The zealots were revolutionaries, who sought to overthrow Roman occupation by force. They wanted God's kingdom, but as a political kingdom that would be established after crushing the Romans.

Judas was also in charge of the money box. When I imagine being Judas I feel myself to be a very no-nonsense, brusque kind of person, who thinks feelings are sentimentality, and has a focus on getting the job done. "Let's get going on this and quit tip-toeing around. When are we going to boot out these Romans? Why are we spending all this time eating and visiting like this? We can't expect to accomplish anything if we don't get tough and get down to business." I imagine Judas believing "the ends justify the means". "Nothing wrong in dipping into the money box when it's needed to accomplish our mission—and I seem to be the ONLY one realistic enough to see how things REALLY ARE and what we need to do to finish. You've got to be tough sometimes. You have to bend the rules when necessary and live in the real world."

I think Judas felt ashamed as he observed Mary's actions. He had to have FELT how much she loved Jesus, and he must have seen how his commitment to Christ was nothing like hers. That shame moved Judas to defensive self-righteousness. I know the feeling! I've been in Judas' shoes, seeing some way in which I've failed to be or do what is right. And feeling ashamed and criticized, I've gotten up on my high horse and found some way to justify myself. You've done it, too, I expect. that's why Judas spoke of the poor, and how the money for the ointment should have been used for them. That's often how we justify ourselves—by trying to put a noble veneer over what we were doing, which was something far from noble.

Judas talked about the poor, and having concern for them. Which Jesus taught and modeled for them many times. But as I imagine being Judas in this story, I realize something. He was talking about the poor as a

CATEGORY, not as brothers and sisters whom we love. Have you met people like that? Who want to reach out in all kinds of ways to faceless, nameless folks, but who can't seem to relate to anyone at all as a person? Judas was so tangled in his need to be right, he was afraid to let go in a personal face-to-face way.

What do we learn from Jesus' words and actions in this text, that we can apply to our lives in the here and now?

Jesus defended Mary. "Leave her alone," he said to Judas. Extravagant outpourings of love can be beautiful and appropriate. We can't always count on another chance to show and share what we feel. It seems clear that Mary knew Jesus was risking his life. Jesus had made at least three predictions of his death by the time of this anointing, but it appears Mary alone understood his mission. By her actions Mary showed her acceptance of Jesus' fate, and her faith in his choice. Do we have that kind of trust in Christ? Are we able to let go of our fears and offer extravagant love for him?

"You will always have the poor with you." I don't think Jesus was teaching us to forget about the poor. Remember his words in Matthew 25, "Whatever you do for the least of these, you do to me." We ARE supposed to care about the poor, and to take action to relieve their suffering. But when we reach out to people through agencies and so forth, we can't afford to lose sight of the real people who are receiving the help.

Jesus wants us to experience the extravagant love of God. And Jesus wants us to respond to God's extravagant love with extravagant love ourselves—for God, and for precious individuals whose feet and faces and entire selves are also in some way CHRIST's feet and faces and selves. We are called to let go and love God and one another with joy and abandon. AMEN.