

First Presbyterian Church, Wausau

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Portrait of Extravagance – March 13, 2016

The author O. Henry wrote a story called *The Gift of the Magi*. It is the story of a young American couple, Della and Jim, who were extremely poor and were very much in love with one another. Each one had a precious and unique possession. Della had beautiful long hair that truly was glorious. Jim had an exquisite gold watch, which had come to him from his father. It was Christmas Eve. Della had less than \$2 to spend on a gift for her beloved husband. She made the decision to cut her beautiful hair and sold it for \$20. With that money she purchased for Jim a platinum fob for his precious watch.

That night when Jim arrived home, he was shocked by Della's shorn hair. She was no less beautiful than before, but he was stunned that she had cut it all off. Slowly he handed her a gift; it was a set of expensive tortoise-shell combs with jeweled edges – combs meant for her lovely hair. He had sold his father's gold watch in order to buy them for her. Each had given up their one precious possession in order to show the extravagant love each felt for the other.

Today's lesson is also about extravagant love.

The previous chapter in John's gospel tells the story of the raising of Lazarus. Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha, were close friends of Jesus. When Jesus heard of the death of Lazarus, he traveled to Bethany. Jesus asked that the stone be rolled away from the mouth of the tomb. The sister Martha protested, saying the stench would be horrible due to the body's decay after four days. Yet Jesus astonished everyone. Calling Lazarus by name, Jesus brought the man back from the dead. Following this action by Jesus, Martha announced her faith in Jesus and proclaimed him the Messiah. It is no coincidence that in a short time, Jesus himself would be raised from the dead. The story of Lazarus foreshadows Jesus' resurrection.

Now this scene around the tomb in Bethany not only gained Jesus several converts, but it also raised a few eyebrows. The Pharisees and chief priests had a meeting. They were concerned that Jesus' activities would stir up trouble that would result in interference by the Romans. Therefore these Jewish leaders began plotting Jesus' death and seeking an opportunity to arrest him.

People were pouring into Jerusalem for the upcoming Passover festival. Jerusalem was not large enough to house all the pilgrims coming into the city, so neighboring towns and villages absorbed the overflow. Bethany was one of these towns. Jesus knows that he is a wanted man and he knows the time is short. The passion story has begun.

Jesus has returned to Bethany to be with his friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Imagine how joyous the family must have been following Lazarus' return from the dead. More than likely they were still caught up in the celebration of the miracle. The presence of Lazarus is a constant reminder of what

Jesus can do – of Jesus' power over death. Lazarus was gone, dead, in the tomb. Yet here he is, reclining at dinner with Jesus and others, sharing a meal.

As Jesus was at table with the other diners, Mary came up to him with a pound of very expensive perfume. She knelt at his feet, and poured the entire amount of the costly perfume on them. Then, she unbraided her hair and used it to wipe his feet.

This action of Mary is shocking on many levels. Besides being a strange thing to do, there are some cultural issues going on here. First, anointing was generally performed on one's head. To touch another person's foot was unheard of. Footwashing was a routine matter of cleanliness as most people in the first century walked around in sandals and their feet would become dusty and dirty. Normally the host would provide a basin of water and maybe a little oil for the guests to use on their own feet. Only a slave would be expected to perform this service on another person. In our story this morning, Mary was showing herself to be so devoted to Jesus that she was willing to go against custom and take on the role of a slave to anoint his feet.

Another cultural point to mention is that women of this time period kept their hair tightly bound up in mixed company. Only an immoral woman would loosen her hair around any man other than her husband. Again Mary went against custom. She didn't care what people thought. She was so caught up in her devotion to Jesus that it did not matter. So she used her own hair to wipe up the excess perfume that she had poured over Jesus' feet.

Then there's the point regarding the expense of the perfume. This was a very costly gift indeed, amounting to about a year's wages. This perfume was a very precious item.

All of this – the action of washing the feet as a slave would, the unbinding of the woman's hair, and the high cost of the perfume itself – this all points to the extravagance of Mary's action. But it also functions as foreshadowing of what Jesus will do on the night of the Last Supper. Jesus himself will take on the role of a slave as he kneels to wash the feet of his own disciples. He will do this out of his great love for them. And furthermore, he will tell them to go out and do likewise. To be his disciple, a follower, means to humble oneself and serve others out of love. Mary is giving us the example of what this means. She knows how to respond to Jesus without being told. She gives boldly of herself to Jesus. Soon Jesus will give boldly of himself to all of us.

Now if Mary is presented here as the model of the true disciple, Judas is presented as her contrast. In reaction to Mary's extravagant expression of her love for Jesus, Judas speaks up. He's the spoilsport. The one that has to destroy the mood of an otherwise emotionally riveting scene. Judas is the keeper of the purse. His interest is in monetary things. All he sees here is excessive waste. "What is this crazy woman doing? Think of all the good we could do with the money from selling this perfume. We could help a lot of poor people."

Sounds pious, right? A little righteous indignation coming from Judas, the keeper of the purse. However, our narrator John lets us in on a secret. It seems our boy Judas here isn't really interested in helping the poor. Instead he likes to help himself to what's in the disciples' purse. He is a bit enamored by money, so it's not surprising when Judas sells Jesus to the authorities here in a few days for a few measly pieces of silver? Judas can talk all he wants about fiscal responsibility, but it's merely a cover for his own greed.

Jesus knows this, and he puts Judas in his place. Jesus tells him to leave her alone. Her show of extravagant love has even more meaning than they could possibly know. Her action was more than a show of her ultimate devotion to Jesus, but was also a preparation for his coming burial. Jesus knows his time is near. The end is coming. And without knowing it, Mary has acted prophetically by anointing Jesus prior to his burial. Jesus blesses her act. Once again an element of this story foreshadows what is to come.

Jesus' final statement in this passage has often been taken inaccurately out of context to justify callousness in regard to the poor. Jesus said "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." The reference that Jesus makes comes from the Book of Deuteronomy and the full verse includes this, "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'"

This means that Jesus expects us to **continually** seek to help those who are needy. It's a part of who we are as disciples. It doesn't end with a donation to the homeless shelter or serving a few plates of food at the community supper. Aiding the poor is to be a part of our ongoing lives as disciples, part of our ongoing commitment to following Christ.

In this story, Mary is the picture of the true disciple. And that role goes far beyond mere duty, beyond mere servant hood. Mary truly loves Jesus. She is devoted to him. She doesn't care how her actions are perceived by others. She is extravagant in her love. She is not afraid to express that love.

I imagine most of us would have been pretty shocked had we been witness to Mary's act of extravagant love. We probably would agree with Judas, at least in principal. But Jesus blessed Mary's act of extravagant love. She thought nothing of the cost. She was willing to give everything, including a most precious gift, to show her love for her friend and teacher. Jesus had returned Mary's brother Lazarus to her, had given him new life. And Mary held nothing back in expressing her tremendous love and gratitude for this gift of new life.

Jesus has given us new life as well. Through his life, death and resurrection, we have found reconciliation with God and have been given the gift of eternal life. Let us allow our lives as disciples to be a constant expression of love and gratitude to Jesus for this most precious gift he has given us. May he find in us a love that is extravagant. And may that love find expression through our devotion to following him as his disciples as we show his love to the world around us.

