

“Loving Extravagantly” – April 7, 2019 – John 12:1-8

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This rather strange story of a woman anointing Jesus is found in all four of the gospels. The details in each differ, as the story is adapted to fit the theological slant of each of the gospel writers, but the basic tale is the same – a woman goes against the customs of the day and performs an intimate anointing on Jesus as an act of extravagant love.

In John’s gospel the story comes immediately following the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus, Mary and Martha were siblings and close friends of Jesus. Lazarus had died and was already in the tomb 4 days by the time Jesus arrived and commanded Lazarus to come out of the tomb. And out he came – alive and well. This extraordinary action by Jesus was the deciding factor in the religious leaders’ decision to have Jesus killed. So, after that, Jesus went to a remote area and stayed out of sight.

But then came the time of the Jewish Passover, and Jesus made the decision to go to Jerusalem with the full knowledge that he was a wanted man, and if captured, he would surely be put to death. On the way, Jesus and his disciples stopped for a meal with Lazarus, Mary and Martha. Whether they acknowledged in their conversation or not, the risk that Jesus was taking by returning to Jerusalem was clearly evident to all who had gathered for that meal. Jesus was heading toward his death.

While Jesus and the others reclined at the table and were served by Martha, Mary quietly came up to Jesus with a jar, sat at his feet, and poured the expensive perfume on his feet. Then, letting down her hair, she wiped his feet with her hair. The gospel writer even notes the fragrance filled the home. Mary’s act was intimate. It was full of love to this one she held so dear. No one spoke out against the sensual act. If anything, I imagine the room fell silent, as all who were gathered witnessed this extravagant act of love, the touch of hands on feet, hair on skin, the aroma of fragrant perfume, the sight of unhindered, unrestrained love for another.

Then one spoke out. Judas. Whose thoughts perhaps were already turning toward betrayal. He ignored or even missed the significance of the action – Jesus had to point it out to him later – that this action was an anointing for burial. They all knew that by going to Jerusalem, Jesus was likely traveling toward his death. Judas saw only an extreme act of waste, the overflow of which was pooling on the floor. Why dump this

precious perfume on someone's feet? He scoffed at the excess. He coveted the money that the perfume could have brought if sold, though he tried to mask it with an image of feeding the poor. But, despite his hidden agenda, doesn't Judas make a valid point?

Of course, the poor matter. Jesus here is not deflecting the needs of the poor. In fact, he quotes a passage from Deuteronomy about the abundance of need in the world that certainly needs to be addressed. But in the now. In this very moment in time, Mary was addressing the need of Jesus. The very real flesh and blood need that was right there with them. One commentator writes,

"Mary responds to the call of love in the moment. In the *now*. Knowing what Jesus is about to face; knowing that he's in urgent need of companionship, comfort, and solace; knowing that the time is short to express all the gratitude and affection she carries in her heart, Mary acts. Given the choice between an abstracted need (the poor "out there") and the concrete need that presents itself at her own doorstep, around her own dinner table, Mary chooses the here and now. She loves the body and soul who is placed in her presence... In other words, it *is* the poor Mary serves when she serves Jesus. Just as it is always Jesus we serve when we love without reservation what God places in front of us, here and now." (Debie Thomas, posted March 31, 2019, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2153-while-you-still-have-me>)

And we have been taught by Jesus that when we reach out in love to another, when we attend to the needs of others before our own, we are, in fact, reaching out in love to Jesus himself. When we love the stranger, the foreigner, the prisoner, the marginalized, the suffering we are loving Jesus himself. Our actions toward others are actions to him.

I'll close with a story - Long ago there lived an old woman who had a wish. She wished more than anything to see for herself the difference between heaven and hell. The monks in the temple agreed to grant her request. They put a blindfold around her eyes, and said, "First you shall see hell."

When the blindfold was removed, the old woman was standing at the entrance to a great dining hall. The hall was full of round tables, each piled high with the most delicious foods — meats, vegetables, fruits, breads, and desserts of all kinds! The smells that reached her nose were wonderful.

The old woman noticed that, in hell, there were people seated around those round tables. She saw that their bodies were thin, and their faces were gaunt, and creased with frustration. Each person held a spoon. The spoons must have been three feet long! They were so long that the people in hell could reach the food on those platters, but they could not get the food back to their mouths. As the old woman watched, she heard their hungry desperate cries. "I've seen enough," she cried. "Please let me see heaven."

And so again the blindfold was put around her eyes, and the old woman heard, "Now you shall see heaven." When the blindfold was removed, the old woman was confused. For there she stood again, at the entrance to a great dining hall, filled with round tables piled high with the same lavish feast. And again, she saw that there were people sitting just out of arm's reach of the food with those three-foot long spoons.

But as the old woman looked closer, she noticed that the people in heaven were plump and had rosy, happy faces. As she watched, a joyous sound of laughter filled the air.

And soon the old woman was laughing too, for now she understood the difference between heaven and hell for herself. The people in heaven were using those long spoons to feed each other.

(Story posted by Jane Anne Ferguson on <http://sermon-stories.com/extravagant-abundance/> an adaption by Elisa Davy Pearmain from Japanese and Chinese folktales, originally posted at <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/toolbox/session1/heaven-hell>)