

“Extravagance Now!”
Sermon preached at the Congregational Church of Salisbury
Salisbury, Connecticut
Fifth Sunday in Lent • 7 April 2019
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Text: John 12:1-8

¹ Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ² There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³ 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. ⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" ⁶ (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.) ⁷ Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸ You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

What do I need to be preaching now?

What do I need to be saying to this particular group now?

The purpose of the sermon is [...] in order that [...].

1

The opening scene of *Cyrano de Bergerac* shows a play within a play. The theater is humming with activity. Elegantly-dressed people and tradespeople alike are coming out for the evening's entertainment, along with vendors of various goodies, pickpockets, and the most anticipated audience member: the baker. The lead actor comes onto the stage and begins his lines — when a voice interrupts: “Villain! Did I not forbid you to show your face here...?” It is *Cyrano*, who has determined he will protect the art of the drama itself from an incompetent performer, and who chases the actor off the stage.

The theater owner realizes he will be forced to return the entry fees — so *Cyrano* takes a purse full of coins and tosses it to the man, more than compensating all his losses. Then we learn he has thrown away his entire month's income, and cannot even afford dinner. “What folly!” says his friend. “But what a gesture!” says *Cyrano*.

We are here today for a gesture. A gesture made by a woman whose heart was filled to overflowing for God's love in human form. An extravagant gesture, contradicted by those who would count pennies, nor risk a demonstration of devotion.

I was taught to measure carefully, as a youngster. My father, who had studied mathematics, liked to quote Dalton: “Whenever you can, count.” There was the delightful Count von Count on *Sesame Street*: “Counting, counting, slowly getting faster; once I start to count, it's very hard to stop!”

Later there came invaluable advice while learning carpentry: measure twice, cut once. A baker, like the much admired character of the play, knows that melt-in-your-mouth perfection of confection has to do with precise amounts of flour, butter, baking powder, salt.

¼ cup = 4 Tbsp ... 3 tsp = 1 Tbsp. Some people get even more precise:

1 dash = 1/8 tsp

2 pinches = 1 dash

2 smidgens = 1 pinch

Whenever you can: count!

2

This is a problem and a paradox for us who follow Jesus. No careful measuring from him, and his financial advice is still pretty edgy, to say the least. What was it he told the rich young man? Sell off everything, give it to the poor, and come, follow me.

Practicalities matter. God is in the details. And often, with Jesus, the life-changing, universe-transforming message is in the gesture. Remember Martha, doing the dishes, who spoke sharply to Mary, sitting at Jesus' knee. By most measures, Martha was stuck with twice her share of the work. But Jesus didn't see it like that. "Mary has chosen the better part," said he. She took a place with the men, seizing the moment for a deep encounter with God on earth.

A picture begins to emerge. Jesus had no investment in the future. *Jesus has no investment in the future.* He poured out everything into that very moment. He taught us this hidden wisdom about the realm of heaven: it is already ready for us to enter.

A newspaper story once covered an economic downturn in France. The government was pushing for austerity, including for pensioners. One elderly man was aghast at the proposed cuts. In shock he wondered, "But how could we go to the theatre?" Laughable, right? Except maybe he got it. Maybe he understood that the fullness of life is for today, and the arts belong to the field worker as much as they do to the landowner.

3

The realm of heaven beckons now, taught Jesus: now is the time to honor the richness of life and the life beyond life. Today is the day for living our extravagant faith. Once I asked a congregation to share how they did that — lived out their faith generously. We passed out sticky notes, and they came back in with a wonderful witness. Many described thoughtful deeds:

Visited an elderly friend.

Bought supplies for Honduras.

Gave a neighbor a ride to the dentist.

Followed someone out of the market who had left her change.

Gave someone a smile who looked like she needed it.

Paid overdue lunch balance for a needy family.

Made dinner for a young woman who had lost a lot of weight but didn't want to eat.

Others took extravagance to heart:

Treated friends to lunch.

Stayed with my father-in-law for three days this week.
Cleaned up outside for others.
Helped someone I don't care for.
I had my students pay each other compliments and asked them to go home and give their parents a compliment for no reason, and see what happens.

That last one is gospel-like, for sure: do something good and unexpected, then “see what happens.” Because extravagance changes things. Life actually changes, when you do the kinds of extravagant things that make no sense in a carefully-measured world.

Give away what is precious to you — time, money, affection — and you release a great spiritual power into the world. Life changes for the better for you and for others, when you express yourself with extravagance — like upending an entire jar of perfume. The kin-dom of God is like that: a gesture of affection and joy, over-the-top and unexpected.

At a Silver Lake retreat the preacher Thomas Troeger¹ told about a perfume counter, where he wanted to buy a sumptuous gift. There was an array of sample bottles, with a sign: “Just one squeeze, please.” A salesperson stood guard.

These were one-ounce bottles, and the price per ounce was as rarified as the scent of the perfume.

One squeeze on wrist: tsss. And test the aroma. A different one on the other wrist: tsss. Smell again. Another on forearm: tsss. The scent would cling there until the next morning's shower. One tiny squeeze of one very expensive ounce. Tsss.

Imagine what it would take to spritz out an entire pound of perfume. Tsss tsss tsss tsss, tsss. One ounce contains approximately 16,000 spritzes. Tsss tsss tsss tsss, tsss. That means that one pound would contain 16 times that amount, or 256,000. Halfway through the second ounce our fingers and thumbs would start to feel the strain. Tsss tsss tsss tsss, tsss. Clinging to wrist, forearm, neck, hair, collar, robe, pulpit, pew, you, me, the village of Salisbury, the county of Litchfield. Tsss tsss tsss tsss, tsss.

But Mary came over to Jesus, the Messiah, the Holy One of God, and no number of spritzes would ever be enough to convey all she had within her heart. One pound of perfume: glug, glug, glug, glug.

4

Extravagance! The scripture says the perfume filled the house. It surely did! Dining room, living room, kitchen, downstairs bath, up the stairs, into the master bedroom, the guest bedroom, the linen closet, the attic. Down to the cellar. When the door opened the fragrance kept on pouring out, waves of heartfelt devotion in olfactory form swirling and rolling down the street, bathing every passer-by and every tree and every rock and bush with the embrace of adoration that can't be measured because it never stops flowing.

The fragrance of Mary's gratitude filled her life. Hers could never be a hidden, private faith. With Jesus there's not really such a thing as private faith: faith is trusting there is enough holy love to give away your whole heart, today! And tomorrow! And the next day!

¹ From Thomas Troeger, “Imagination and Creativity in Worship and Preaching,” General Association, Silver Lake Conference Center, Sharon, CT, 29 September 2008.

How could you hold in something that so longed to burst out? When you discover a great love and excitement within you, don't you want the object of your love to know? And isn't Christ, the source of every hope and promise, the object of our love — isn't Christ in everyone?

Why not pour yourself out for the next Christ you meet? And watch the universe transform!

5

In case this is the first sermon you have ever heard — and just in case this is the last sermon you will ever hear — let me say it clear: in you God has planted extravagant wholeness, extravagant harmony, extravagant justice, extravagant joy, extravagant love. Now go and give it away, for Jesus' sake!