

## An Extravagant Gift

We are coming towards the end of our Lenten journey. A week from now, on Palm Sunday, we will hear of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem followed by the passion narrative, the story of Jesus' suffering and death. In this sense, we are right with Jesus and the disciples in the arc of the narrative. This little stop off for a dinner party in Bethany at the house Lazarus happens six days before the Passover, which is when the last supper took place and Jesus was betrayed to the Pharisees and handed over to trial and death. The story itself alludes to this fact, when Jesus says that Mary had bought this expensive perfume for the day of his burial and he will not always be with them.

We also get an odd cast of characters in this story, who each in their own way foreshadow Jesus' death. We start with the host, Lazarus, the man who had died and Jesus had raised from the dead as a foretaste of things to come. Martha, the one onto whom Jesus proclaimed that he was the resurrection and the life. And Judas, the one who would betray Jesus to death for a bag full of silver. And then there is Mary, the main character. Mary is the friend of Jesus. She is the one whom Jesus consoles, and the one with whom Jesus weeps at the death of Lazarus. She is also a disciple of Jesus. In another story we hear of her sitting at his feet, listening and soaking in his words and his message. She knew enough, understood enough of what he was saying to buy a bottle of perfume in advance for his coming death to anoint his body. But in the story, her function is as the prophet of Jesus, the one foretelling his imminent death, and the proper response to it.

Mary's act of anointing Jesus' feet with the bottle of nard and wiping them with her hair comes as an unexpected and inexplicable gift. The gift is both senseless and extravagant. And immediately Judas recognizes this fact and he counts the cost. He says it is worth three hundred denarii, or about a year's wages, and it was a total waste, poured out in a moment and worthless the minute he walks out the door into the dusty streets and his feet are caked with dirt. It's not even timely as it should have been reserved for the time of Jesus' death. But Mary sees it differently. The bottle was bought for the day of his burial, but she realized that the time for her gift was now, because it was really about her expression of love for Jesus. Love cannot be held back for a later date, or saved for a big occasion. You cannot calculate the cost of love and still call it love. The gift of love must be gratuitous to be worthy of the title. And such an act is the only possible response to the realization of what Jesus is about to do in the giving of his life.

When I look for a simple example of this type of gratuitous love in the world around me, I think about a scene from my time at St. Luke's in Darien. That church had a non-profit organization called Person-to-Person. It had started in the late 60s, that had grown to have a budget twice that of the church. They provided literally tons of food to the hungry every year, clothing, furniture, financial assistance for utilities, help finding affordable housing – all sorts of practical aid; it was incredible. But the picture that sticks in my mind is the Christmas toy store they ran. It took over the parish hall and filled it with thousands of toys and books, and let struggling parents come in and choose one of each for all of their children so those parents could have the dignity and joy of providing presents to their kids. Now the truth is that they could use the money spent on the toy store to buy food and clothing for a lot of families, or even to pay for utility assistance so a family could have warmth and light in their home. It would make sense, and in a utilitarian way be of greater value, because people simply need food and warmth to survive. But Jesus came not that people might simply survive, but that they might life, and have it abundantly. So in this instance, instead of simply providing food, they also made sure that a child felt loved. They filled the building with toys to choose from. Parents get to pick out what they want to give their child. For them, the magic of Christmas has nothing to do with Santa Claus, but with the look of joy in the little one's eyes and the loving bond of a parent to a child. And the value of that gift cannot be weighed by its cost alone, it cannot be measured against heating bills or a bag of groceries, because the gift of love to a needy child is not calculable in such terms. It is an act of excessive love simply because it wasn't necessary for survival; but such expressions of love are necessary for the life that God intended us to live.

People are sick not only for the lack of love received, but for the lack of the ability and freedom to overflow in an expression of their own love, and this is the gift that something like the toy store enables.

The lesson of this story, much to Judas' chagrin, is not fundamentally about money but about expressing a gratuitous love - Something that is not utilitarian. I think about a choir that works for hour upon hour for weeks to perfect a piece of music, an anthem to express their love in an act of effusive worship, poured out in a matter of minutes and then it is over. Was that few minutes worth the hours that went into it? I think they would all tell you that it can't be measured by such an equation because this was their expression of love for God, the production of a moment of true beauty in the world. Or again, what do we spend on flowers for a service like Easter day. What could we provide with that budget spent on fleeting flowers that will soon die, but those flowers, lovingly arranged, put you in the place to worship the lord in the beauty of his holiness, and you know that that gift was worth it. The great Anglican writer Evelyn Underhill said, "worship is summed up in sacrifice – the movement of generosity in response to God's sacrificial act of redemption in Christ and our participation in it." These are the ways we worship God and acknowledge the great gift given to us in his sacrifice - by expressing our unfettered love in return.

These are, indeed, the proper responses to the God who has shown such unmeasured love. The God of Abraham, who promised descendants more plentiful than the stars. Count them if you can he said, your offspring will yet be more numerous. And Abraham knew he was truly and eternally loved. The God of Moses who provided more food than the people could possibly eat in the desert. The God who said, collect all you need for today, but don't store any, just trust in me because tomorrow there will be more, more than you need, more than you can eat. And the people knew that they were loved and provided for. The God of Isaiah who makes rivers in the barren wilderness, life-springs more plentiful than one could drink, and the people knew that they were created for love and so they praise the God of abundant creation.

This God was manifest earlier in John's gospel as the Jesus who came to the wedding at Cana and there produced more wine for the celebration than could possibly be drank. He was the Christ who was confronted with the needy hunger of five thousand people on a hillside, hungry for his teaching but more desperate to fill their empty bellies, and he provided food for them to eat their fill and yet twelve baskets of excess remained. And this is the God whose overabundant life in his very being overflowed the grave and spilled out of the tomb on that third day so that all might be filled with a life that was abundant and eternal. The love of this God could not be calculated, should not be measured, but needs be enjoyed in its sheer gratuity.

And so, if Mary's gift to Jesus in the story is to be regarded, by Judas and those like him, as a waste, then she wasted as God does in nature and history, in creation and salvation. It is a holy waste, a waste known most simply as amazing grace. Hers was an extravagant gift and one yet still not in proportion to the gift of Jesus that is to come that the story foreshadows. On the cross, Christ poured out his love in ecstatic waste. He could have lived and done more, but the beauty of his sacrifice was in its waste. By most accounts, Jesus was only just over thirty years old, and his ministry was only three years long. Why didn't he continue for thirty years before dying on the cross? He could have taught more, healed more, enlightened more, fed more, forgiven more. But instead this was the plan, for Jesus to die an extravagant death that left no question to the endless and immeasurable abundance of God's gracious love. He never counted the cost of forgiveness because a calculated grace is not love at all.

The great 20th century theologian Paul Tillich once wrote that the great danger of Christianity lies in a potential reduction to a "religious and moral utilitarianism that always asks for the reasonable purpose." This, he says, stifles the creative and redemptive power of effusive love that comprises the very heart and meaning of the Christian message. There is no creativity without holy waste - it is how God created the world through his abundant overflow and it is how he redeemed his people, and it is how, not only our own gratitude must be expressed, like Mary's, but also how the message of God's eternal love need be proclaimed.

As we stand in these last days of the wilderness of Lent, are their ways we could pour out our abundant love for God in anticipation for the coming overflow of Easter? Are there ways in which we could proclaim the love of God that are so immeasurable in their senseless gratuity that they must be taken as a response to the infinite grace offered by Jesus. The poor are with you, can you make sure that they know their incredible

worth? The sad are with you, can you proclaim to them the excessive joy of the Lord? Those desperately in need of kindness are with you, can you help them to feel the incalculable love of God? Those worn down by the mundane grind of daily life are among you, can you make them see the wondrous beauty of God's holiness? It all begins with each of us recognizing in our own hearts the incredible gift that God offers on Easter morning. That is where the creativity of the response is born, because without the abundance of the heart, nothing great can happen. Amen.