



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: March 21, 2010

Pouring Ourselves Out... For Jesus, Robert B. Culp

John 12:1-8

In early March, Kath and I were able to spend a few days on the campus of Princeton Theological Seminary, attending a pre-retirement seminar as well as celebrating our 38th wedding anniversary. Both of us experienced waves of nostalgia as we walked across the beautiful grounds of the Seminary which are remarkably much the same as they were in 1972-1975 when Kathy was putting me through my Master of Divinity program as a circulation assistant at the Seminary's Speer Library ... a position, by the way, that saved me many fines for overdue books!

There were a number of memories that bubbled to the surface for me, with most of them tied to specific buildings on the campus – Alexander Hall which once housed the entire Seminary community in the early 1800's; Speer Library, of course, where my favorite study carrel was still in place; and Miller Chapel where I made my first efforts in preaching God's Word, where I came to cherish the role of music in worship services, and where I often went to sit in silent prayer all alone ... especially during my first and last years there.

As Kath and I walked across the campus one day on our way to lunch, I stopped to tie my shoe, and when I glanced up at Miller Chapel, framed by several barren wintry trees with piles of snow near the chapel's entrance, I remembered an old photo of my father ... taken in 1940 ... when, as a student at Western Seminary in Pittsburgh, he was visiting Princeton for a special program. There he stood on the steps of the chapel, wearing a long winter coat and a hat, and waving at the camera with the appropriately reserved smile of a Presbyterian minister in training.

Interestingly, as I considered where we were on the campus, and being in pretty much the same spot as my father was 70 years ago, I thought about this morning's passage from John, and a single word came to mind ... "extravagance." My father never made a lot of money, but he was one of the richest individuals I have ever known ... generous with his time, overflowing with his compassion, and a bit eccentric in his bulk purchases. When he died a little over 17

years ago, he left mother in pretty good shape – at least when it came to cases of apricot nectar, paper towels, and toilet paper! And on the very day of his funeral, a case of wooden hangers and 4 new pillows was delivered to the front door by UPS!

“Extravagance!”

Close to the Passover festival, Jesus returned to Bethany, less than 2 miles from Jerusalem. He made his way to the home of his friend Lazarus, where Martha was serving a dinner in honor of Jesus. It was a joyous reunion of friends and a celebration of the new life given to Lazarus, with great joy and gratitude filling the home.

At one point Mary left the table and returned carrying a beautiful jar of perfume. Kneeling at Jesus’ place, she lovingly poured the pound of perfume over his feet in an act of anointing. Anointing with oil back then was offered as a blessing on special occasions such as weddings and the consecration of priests. It was a bold and daring act on her behalf, because in Jesus’ day women were not allowed to touch men in public. The dinner guests were stunned as they watched Mary wipe Jesus’ feet with her hair, and they were entranced by this generous outpouring of gratitude. The fragrance of this expensive perfume filled the house, leaving the aroma of generosity and love. Days earlier the sadness of death had hung over the home, but now it was filled with the fragrance of life and friendship.

But then this aura of wonder and gratitude was harshly interrupted by Judas, who asked, “Why wasn’t this expensive perfume sold? It’s worth an entire year’s salary. It could have fed a poor family for a year. That would have been a better use than this wasteful extravagance.” Generosity is countered by greed. Gratitude is overshadowed by critique. And the joyous atmosphere is suddenly burst like a balloon.

John notes that Judas wasn’t really concerned for the poor. He was the disciples’ treasurer, keeping the common purse and freely embezzling the funds. He couldn’t tolerate the useless waste of a year’s worth of income. Somehow, it turned his stomach and made him disgusted. Even as one of the twelve insiders, Judas still had not gotten Jesus’ message.

As Kathleen Norris reminds us, “Maybe monks and poets know, as Jesus did, when a friend, in an extravagant, loving gesture, bathes his feet in nard, an expensive fragrant oil, and wiped them with her hair, that the symbolic act matters ... that those who know the exact price of things, as Judas did, often don’t know the true cost or value of anything.”

In contrast to Judas, Jesus recognizes the value of Mary’s act. He admonishes Judas to let Mary alone. Her gift is preparation for Jesus’ death, which was imminent.

The Gospel of John is a mystical gospel. John invites us to see beyond the surface of events into their holy depths. Jesus sees that Mary’s anointing is more than a gift of gratitude

for Lazarus' being brought back to life. It is the symbolic anointing of his body with spices for his upcoming burial, a holy ritual she is offering her beloved friend. The pound of perfume is worthless compared to the price Jesus will soon pay for his faith. Mary's extravagant gesture of uninhibited love is of far more value than the perfume itself. And indeed, this extravagant blessing empowers Jesus for the next phase of his ministry in which he holds fast to his conviction, even in the face of death.

In Jesus' reply to Judas' wet-blanket objection, he reminds the dinner guests that it will always be necessary to care for the poor ... that as God is generous to us, we are called to lavish compassion and service upon those in need. But Jesus is also reminding his followers that his presence among them is limited, so there is a sense of urgency to respond to Jesus while he is still with them. Mary has recognized this, and she responds with her act of love. It is important to give to the poor, but it is also acceptable to give generously as an expression of gratitude.

The dictionary defines extravagance as a great outlay of money or resources exceeding the limits of reason or necessity. And Mary's gift does seem to be outlandish, excessive, more than is reasonable. Yet, it is small compared to the gift of Jesus' life given by God and the gift of Jesus' laying his own life down for the sake of others. God's love is far more abundant than we can ever earn or deserve, and when we receive of this awesome gift, we feel moved to respond, as did Mary.

In this story, the responses of the three main characters are so human. There are times when we feel like Mary, richly blessed and overwhelmed with gratitude, that we need to express ourselves in a profound and meaningful way. Many of us have days like Judas, when we feel stingy, selfish, and critical. We want our share of the wealth and don't like to see resources foolishly squandered. Sometimes we can relate to Jesus and graciously accept the unexpected gifts of grace that others offer.

How much are we called to give of ourselves? How much is enough? How much is too much – reckless, foolish, excessive, extravagant? A story is told from the life of Thomas A. Beckett, Archbishop of Canterbury in the 12th century. When Thomas was a baby, his mother would weigh him in a basket on his birthdays, and then fill the basket with coins, food, and clothing to the identical weight of the child. Then she would go and share her good fortune and joy with those who were poor. She gave in the same measure that God had given to her.

In response to how much Jesus has given to her, in gratitude for the life of her brother given back to her, in thanksgiving for Jesus' life-giving forgiveness and acceptance of her ... Mary finds the freedom to be extravagant. When we look upon the cross of Christ that is ever before us as we worship God, and consider the infinite and eternal significance of God in Christ reconciling the world to himself, we come face to face with a divine extravagance that throws moderation and respectability to the wind.

I learned recently of a group of friends who had been supporting a colleague through years of severe depression caused by several traumatic events ... both as a child and as an adult. She endured therapy, hospitalizations, and medications, only to suffer declining emotional health. When she was near the bottom, a program in Denver was found offering her the kind of treatment that promised to be the turning point. Her financial resources, though, were drained, her health insurance did not cover it, and it cost \$20,000 for three weeks.

This group of friends offered her their prayers and support, but even more they dipped into their savings and started a special fund. Some took a risk, stepped out in faith, and arranged for loans, while others e-mailed and phoned friends to join in their efforts, and within a week's time the entire amount was raised. One member of the group flew with her to admit her to the program. It was not easy and certainly was not a quick fix, for years of hard work followed the treatment program. As you may suspect, the group suffered the scorn of a few who thought they were co-dependents and foolish to make such an investment in the life of another human being. But the members of this group understood it to be the response required of those who follow Jesus. Ten years later, their friend is now a therapist herself, using her experience and skills to offer new life and hope to others. Though extravagant, it was a worthy investment that continues to bear rich fruit.

Commander Richard Jadick tells of an experience of his during the early stages of the Iraq War. He is a Navy doctor who volunteered for duty when he learned of the shortage of doctors, and was assigned to a Marine regiment initiating the attack on insurgents in Fallujah, which was a very nasty battle.

He writes that in treating traumatic injuries, there is something known as the "golden hour." A badly injured person who gets to the hospital within an hour is much more likely to be saved. But Jadick writes that in combat the "golden hour" doesn't exist ... that it is more a matter of 10-15 minutes, and sometimes much less.

He wanted to set up an emergency room in the middle of the battlefield. Loading up two armored ambulances, he convoyed into the city in the dead of night to establish an aid station in the prayer room of an old government building. Jadick and his men found some metal plates in the street, cleaned them, and draped them with sterile gauze as trays for his operating instruments. They stacked sandbags by the windows. The night was quiet, but at sunrise the silence was broken by sniper fire. Jadick and his medical assistants were prepared. His commanding officer stated that it is believed 30 lives were saved because Jadick and his colleagues worked at the front line. He was awarded the Bronze Star with a Combat V for valor.

Risky? Foolish? Excessive? Sacrificial? Loving? All of these and more. Life-saving. Priceless. But to be quite honest, such extravagance is not confined to a battlefield far away.

For I have witnessed such “extravagant love” being expressed within the life and ministries of our church family time and again.

In his beautiful hymn reflecting on the love of God expressed on the cross, Isaac Watts writes, “Were the whole realm of nature mine, That were an offering far too small; Love so amazing, so divine, Demands my soul, my life, my all.”

Indeed, the extravagant, boundless love of God demands the priceless response of our pouring ourselves out for the sake of Jesus. And when such love is shown by us in our daily relationships, in our mission endeavors, in our service in the name of our Lord ... the fragrance of generosity and love will be a hallmark for our lives.

Let us pray: O Lord, your love for us is so lavish, so extravagant, so gloriously real. You call us to trust Christ Jesus, to bet everything on him, for in him is abundant life and the truth that sets us free. May we follow him, as did his early disciples, into the future, wherever it may lead. And may we discover, as they did, who he is, as we stumble along behind, throughout all our days ... in joy and love, in gratitude and praise. In Jesus’ name. Amen.