

Wesley United Methodist Church

April 7, 2019

“Costly Extravagance.”

John 12:1-8

A few years ago there was the true story about a man in New York City who was kidnapped. His kidnappers called his wife and asked for \$100,000 ransom. She talked them down to \$30,000. The story had a happy ending, the man returned home unharmed, the money was recovered, and the kidnappers were caught and sent to jail.

Don't you wonder what happened when the man got home and found out that his wife got him back for a discount? Can you imagine the conversation between the wife and kidnappers? “\$100,000 for that old guy? You have got to be crazy. Just look at him! Look at that gut! You want \$100,000 for that? You've got to be kidding. Give me a break here. \$30,000 is my top offer.”

I suppose there are some here this morning who can identify with his wife and some of you find yourself identifying with the husband. The point of the story is this I suppose that sometimes it's okay to be extravagant.

That is precisely what this story in the gospel of John is all about. Remember the story with me. Jesus is on his way to the cross. It's just a few days before Passover. The chief priests and the scribes are plotting against him. Judas is about ready to betray him. The crucifixion is less than a week away and Jesus knows it. Jesus and his disciples stop at Bethany where Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. Now, as they are having dinner, a woman comes to Jesus and does a beautiful but extravagant thing for our Lord. The gospel of John tells us that the woman was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. Mary brings an alabaster jar of very expensive ointment. She breaks open the jar and pours the costly perfumed oil on Jesus' feet.

Why did she do that? Some say it was an act of gratitude in which she was thanking Jesus for raising Lazarus from the dead. Some say it was an act of consecration. Others say it was a foreshadowing, an act of preparation, in which she was anointing his body for the death which was to come in Jerusalem a few days later. All say it was an act of love and kindness.

But the story doesn't end there. Mary is criticized by some of the folks in the room. “Why was this perfume not sold for a hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” Well, it's not a bad question. Judas may have been a thief and informant, he may have embezzled money from the common purse, occasionally, he may have had other motives besides the high moral road he seems to walk, and he probably didn't give a flying leap for the poor. But isn't he basically right? Couldn't the pound of expensive perfume dumped on Jesus' feet have been used for a better purpose? Nard was imported from the Himalayas. Couldn't the money have been used to buy food for a starving family or improve the miserable housing in Jesus' neighborhood? Judas reprimanded her for being so wasteful. And then Jesus reprimands Judas for being so stingy. Stinginess means being overly concerned about money...sort of like the kidnapped man's wife, who obviously felt that money is real important. Maybe he reasoned like this: “Which is easier to replace, a husband or \$100,000?”

Just how much did Mary's generous act cost anyway? Judas, who probably knew more than most the going rate for such an extravagance, suggests that the perfume could have been sold for 300 denarii. A footnote in my Bible reports that a denarii was a day's wage for most people. You can do the math. Figure a six-day work week with the Sabbath off and you're basically looking at close to a year's salary. A year's salary on Jesus' feet? Translate that to today's economy and we're talking about \$50,000 poured on Jesus.

Why did Mary do such a thing? Did his feet smell that bad? Jesus suggests that the perfume has something to do with his upcoming burial. But Mary couldn't have known that. And if she did, doesn't she go a little overboard with funeral expenses?

But Jesus said, “Leave her alone.” The fragrance of the perfume was absolutely permeating every nook and cranny of the house, and Jesus says, “Get off her case.” And then he says something that sounds a bit confusing, if not downright callous. He says, “You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.” What does Jesus mean by that? The record is clear that Jesus was a friend of the poor. The evidence is so overwhelming in the gospels that we hardly need to mention his friendship. He also commissioned his disciples and us to take care of the poor.

So Mary anoints Jesus' feet. I find it interesting in the Gospel of John that in the very next chapter Jesus is washing the feet of his disciples, an action that clearly points to service in the world. John seems to be saying that there is a connection between honoring Jesus and serving Jesus. Between loving God and loving neighbor.

Maybe Mary goes overboard in honoring Jesus. Maybe she over does it. That's not really our problem, is it? Our problem is usually underdoing it...taking Jesus for granted. Going days without consulting him in prayer, assuming he's aware of our gratitude and thankfulness. Rightly seeking to help and serve the poor people but neglecting the

relationship with Jesus that keeps sending us into the world to wash feet. Giving lip service to the importance of honoring the man in order to get on with the real business of the church.

You know, as I look closely at this story I don't think it's about frugality or money at all. This story is about gratitude and recognizing what Jesus has done in our lives. And whether you're rich or whether you're poor, there is a common call to stop, slow down, and give thanks. There will be time to serve the poor. As Jesus says, they are always with us. Never has that call been more pressing or obvious for the world's Christians.

Our honoring of Jesus may not involve money or perfume at all. But the act itself, like Mary's, will fill the church with a certain fragrance. It is the fragrance of love, devotion and gratitude for one who has loved us so lavishly and in such a costly way. Three hundred denarii can't begin to touch it. How do you honor and say thanks to someone who saved your life?