

God Moves Us... to Empty Ourselves

Part 5 of Sermon Series: *God Moves...*

a sermon based on

John 12:1-8

and delivered on

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I have to admit that I think John was a little bit harsh with Judas in the passage we just heard. Think about it. What if that jar of ointment had been sold so that the money could be used to help the poor? Let's assume that Judas' valuation of the nard was correct – that it was worth about three hundred denarii. A denarius was the daily wage for a day worker. Take away fifty-two Sabbath days from a year and you get three hundred thirteen.

Without even counting the value of the bottle we're at about a year's wages. Gone. Like that. Poof. Wasted!? I get it. This is one of those places where it's not too difficult to agree with Judas.

If we look to Matthew's account we hear that "when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, 'Why this waste? For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor.'" (Mt 26:8-9) Matthew acknowledges what John doesn't. Even though it may have been Judas that actually said those words, that the others were right there nodding their heads and baking him up. I get it, but there is a rub with this story (Forgive the pun).

This wasn't just some philosophical discussion about the best use of resources. Mary was right there in the midst of sharing this great gift – literally pouring out her treasure on Jesus' feet, only to be scolded by Judas and the other.

"Leave her alone!" (Jn 12:7b) Jesus' words, not mine. "What she's done will be told in remembrance of her." (Mt:26:13b) But... "Leave her alone!" Jesus sticks up for her. Then he puts it into perspective.

"Do you really think this one gift will eradicate poverty? Really? Remember when there were those five thousand men and their families who'd been there with us listening attentively to me all day? Remember that? Do you remember what you all said when I told you to feed them? Huh? Come on... Let's hear it. 'Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?' (Mk 6:37b) That was when there were only five thousand. What about the seven thousand later? You yourselves didn't think that that was even enough for one meal for those people.¹ Now, you have the audacity to shame this woman who is pouring upon me what is likely her old age security? Look she's not just emptying the bottle; she has emptied herself.

How do we get here? What has motivated this extravagance in Mary?

Well, first off, we hear that her brother, Lazarus, was at this dinner also. You all remember Lazarus? Right? Jesus brought him back to life after he'd been dead four days. (Jn 11:17-44) Seems like she might just have felt pretty blessed by Jesus. Doesn't it?

Of course if we put this passage together with Matthew's account (and Mark's) where – although we don't hear Mary's name (or Martha or Lazarus for that matter) – Jesus and the disciples had come to Bethany (Mary and Martha and Lazarus' hometown) in his final days on his way to Jerusalem where he would die for our sake – we hear that this all took place in the house of Simon the Leper. (Mt. 26:6, Mk 14:3) How can that be, when John says, it was Lazarus' home? (Jn 12:1) This has to be the same event. It has to be. What are the odds of two women in Bethany doing the same thing in those few days right before Jesus died? Moreover, what are the chances that the disciples and/or Judas would have made that same complaint? It's the same event.

So let's do a little verbal mathematics. It's called logic. As John reports, Jesus is in the home of Lazarus (the same home where Mary and Marth live.) But what is home? It's the place people dwell. Right? But in Matthew we're told that this is the house of Simon the leper. Simon owned the home. That could make Simon Mary's father. For Jesus to be at a leper's house, I'd feel pretty confident in assuming that the leprosy might just be gone. Had Jesus healed Mary's father of leprosy? Had he made it possible for her hug her father? Think about that, for a moment.

Now, why might this woman be so willing to go to such extravagance? I almost said "excess," but *excess* would imply "too much," and that's not how Jesus saw it.

Jesus had brought this woman's brother back to life. He'd brought her father back into her life. Wow! And now... as he's preparing to go into Jerusalem where he knows what's expected of him, she anoints him.

I think it's telling that Judas (and the others) only complain when she gets to his feet. Matthew tells us that she poured it on his head (the anointing typical for a leader). If she had stopped there would they have been okay with it? A little bit of excitement, but not too much? A little bit of extravagance, but not too much?

"She bought it so that she could keep it for the day of my burial." (Jn 6:7b) "I've been trying to tell you knuckleheads about this for a while and you keep ignoring me." But Mary listened (Maybe a little bit too much for Martha's pleasure), but Mary listened. Because she listened she has been moved empty not just this bottle but to empty herself so that she can claim what I'm offering all of you.

Pretty cool, huh? But there's still that little bit of Judas in me. Why not sell it and give it to the poor if only for one day? It could take care of one family for a year. But then what? That little bit of Judas lingers on in the Church. I've heard it since early in my ministry, when I was raising money with the youth group to go to Appalachia for mission trips. Why not save money and do the work nearby? Isn't this a bit extravagant?

Then there were the conversations with the youth about the satellite dish on the top of the ramshackle house with the creek running through the back yard – the creek that homes along that hollow discharged their waste water (You could see it. Really easy to tell who was washing laundry by where the foam started.). Why were they paying for this extravagant luxury, when their house is falling apart? Never mind that the price of that satellite service would be a drop in the bucket for the needs of that family. Never mind that it was probably cheaper than taking the family out to the movies once (or maybe twice) a month in the isolated mountains. How dare they think that they deserve the pleasure of any luxury as long as they are poor.

I've heard it in churches (not usually by the generous souls) when it's been suggested that the congregation make some sort of improvement to the building like new carpeting so that the church – God's house – looks nicer. Never mind that what these buildings look like tell the world what we think about God.

How many of us have put thousands of dollars towards our child's wedding? For a day? But a day, with promise. Right? A day that unites that couple for what we hope will be forever.

That same Jesus who told his disciples that it was okay for Mary to do this extravagant thing – that same Jesus who praised Mary in front of all of them – that same Jesus when he tells us that sometimes extravagance is a good thing.

That same Jesus says it's okay to let loose in church and to show a little joy. That same Jesus tells us that it excites him when you refuse to listen to the poo-poo person in your life or in the pew next to you who suggests that your extravagance should be toned down or redirected.

I am privileged to serve in this church, here, where we have people concerned about making it look beautiful and making sure that it sounds beautiful with the clavinova.

When you're tempted to resist to be generous for an extravagance or others discourage you, remember that that urge is God moving you to empty yourself so that you can claim his grace more fully. When you think that your "extravagance" is inadequate remember that Mary's extravagance wouldn't have eradicated poverty. Bill Gates has given \$350 million dollars to polio eradication in conjunction with the Rotary Foundation. We're getting closer, but still not there.

Let God move you to letting it all out how ever that may be, so that you can hear his praise, and fill him with joy. AMEN.

¹ Paraphrase and exposition of Mark 6:31-34