

Emily Zumpe
Peace Church, Munich, Germany
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John 12: 1-8, Mary anoints Jesus

Extravagant love, Bold commitment

Good morning brothers and sisters,

I just returned from a trip to London last night, and two days ago, a friend there pointed out that the crocuses were in bloom. The weather was warming up, the grass was green, and I could feel spring just around the corner. After the long snowy winter we've shared in Munich, I admit that my heart leaps a bit in eager anticipation for the season to come. I love spring – the tulips, daffodils, trees in blossom, cool sunny days, a gentle reminder of the warmth of summer yet to come. For me, spring is a time of new growth and new beginnings. Some people use the end of the Advent season or the beginning of the New Year to think back about their year and make plans for the future. But for me, I go through this time of reflection, dreaming and planning in the spring. Maybe my brain and creative energy just need a hint of sunshine to get rolling!

Today is the 5th Sunday in Lent, and when I was preparing for today over the past few weeks, two ideas kept popping up in my head and in my encounters with other people. I'd like to share these with you as the guiding principles behind our sermon text this morning: Extravagant love, and Bold commitment.

A few weeks ago Pastor Christine preached about two sisters, Martha and Mary, using a beautiful painting by Achim Schuster. I remember Christine describing the older sister Martha, busy about her work in the house, cooking and serving the guests. I saw myself in this woman, and wondered if I would have reacted as she did if my little sister Mary didn't help me out around the house when there were lots of people visiting. How would I feel in the kitchen, missing the jokes and stories, while my little sister spent all evening sitting and listening at Jesus' feet? Mary was mesmerized by Jesus – and I tried to think back to the last time that I was completely mesmerized, completely focused on God, forgetting everything else that I should be doing or could be doing? I wondered how often the chores and important responsibilities of everyday life get in my way of listening to Jesus speak.

So I have been thinking about the balance between both sides of myself in the last weeks – the Mary, who longs to sit at Jesus' feet and just soak in his love and teachings, and the Martha – showing her love and devotion to Jesus with action, working to make Jesus and his friends comfortable in her home. So it was with great joy that I discovered the return to these two sisters in today's sermon text. In John 12, we again find Martha busy in the house when Jesus and his friends come to visit, cooking and serving. And we find Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead on his last visit, simply lounging at the table (just like Mary on the last visit). But things have changed in the time between these visits.

Just before our story begins, the chief priests, Pharisees and holy men of Jerusalem decided to put a stop to the miracles and life of Jesus of Nazareth. They were angry about his raising Lazarus from the dead and were worried about his influence over the Jewish people. So Jesus had left the city, and was lying low in the desert country outside of town. As an important religious holiday came around, the Pharisees expected Jesus to return to Jerusalem for the Passover feast, as did devout Jews in those days. So they had put a price on his life – Jesus was a wanted man. Overnight, he was transformed from a healer, helper and friend to a dangerous criminal. How often are our perceptions of people changed overnight? Or just by hearing one person's opinion? Are we afraid of people who are different, or are we quick to judge those we do not know or understand?

It is in this atmosphere of danger that we pick up in our sermon text.

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him.

Bethany is a small town just 3 km outside of Jerusalem. Jesus comes into town to celebrate the traditional religious Passover feast, and he returns to the home of his friends, where he was so warmly welcomed on his last visit. But this visit is extra-special – it is not only 6 days before a special holiday, but Lazarus has also decided to throw a big dinner party for Jesus and his disciples. I can imagine the excitement in the air – Jesus and his friends had been wandering around the desert, lying low and hiding a bit. They were probably dusty and tired from sleeping in uncomfortable, make-shift places and always being on the move. They were probably hungry – for food and fellowship since they had been wandering outside of town. What a delight it must have been to see Lazarus and his family again!

Our text says:

Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.

So Jesus, Lazarus and all their friends were lounging around a big table enjoying a meal. The scene reminds me of communion, and of my own big dinners with family and friends – they are all together, sharing bread and wine, celebrating the upcoming holiday with eager anticipation. They are certainly laughing and embracing. And Martha is again bustling around cooking, serving and making everyone feel at home. Martha is a blessing – without her the evening would not be possible. Yet she is not the focus of our story. It is her sister Mary.

Mary quietly enters the room, carrying a beautiful jar and kneels again at Jesus' feet, just like on his last visit. But this time, Mary has not come just to sit and listen, mesmerized by Jesus' stories. She is ready to do something, to participate. This time, she kneels with action in her heart – she wants to show Jesus how much she loves him and wants to honor and serve him. Breaking all social expectations of a woman of her class, Mary slowly lets down her hair and opens the jar in her hands. Immediately, a sweet and luxurious smell fills the room, and I can imagine that conversation trickles down into dead silence. All eyes dart about looking for the source of that strong smell, until everyone's eyes rest on Mary.

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.

Can you imagine the looks on the faces of everyone present? Some must have been shocked, others horrified, all surprised. With mouths hanging open in disbelief, I believe many of those

present were thinking, “what is she doing? She must be crazy!” But Mary was not concerned about what anyone thought. She wanted to show Jesus a sign of her extravagant love. She wanted to give him a gift – a symbol of the value he had brought into her life, the change he had caused in her.

But hers was not just any gift. It truly was a generous and extravagant one. One of the disciples, Judas Iscariot, tells us just how much money this gift was worth in the next verse:

But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” Three hundred denarii would be nearly a year's wages for a labourer.

One day's labor in the fields was worth 1 denari in those days, so Mary's jar of perfume was worth almost a year's work, almost a year of hard physical labor, sweat and exhaustion. And note that she didn't just use a few drops of this expensive perfume – she poured out a whole jar on Jesus feet. I wonder where she got this pound of nard, this pint of luxurious perfume? Had she been collecting her earnings ever since she was a child, tucking away small bits of money over many years? Was she saving it for a special occasion – her wedding day, to care for her children someday, even to anoint Jesus body upon his deathbed as he later mentions? And if she had been saving for many years, why did she decide to make this outrageous purchase now? He was not dying – he was sitting at their dinner table. Mary had no way of knowing what events were to come – she could not know the symbolism and importance that her gift would hold for us today, over 2000 years later. We know about Jesus' arrest, trial, crucifixion and resurrection – and we know Mary's anointing was the beginning of the passion story. But during that evening in Lazarus' home, no one knew what was to come – Mary did not know that Jesus would soon be dead. Her decision to anoint him was driven by her pure desire to love and serve him. It was an outward symbol of her inner feelings, a gift of extravagant love.

But there was also another motivation for Mary. If she only wanted to show love, she could have sung a song, danced for Jesus, given him a hug or a small token of thanks. But her bold decision to wash his feet with her hair was a sign of something more than love and devotion. The action of footwashing was a way that slaves honored their masters in Biblical days. It was a way of showing commitment, of taking care of the dirtiest part of the body in those days. Please remember – people went barefoot or wore thin leather sandals, and they did not have nice paved sidewalks as we do today. The feet were tough, calloused and dusty from walking on hot desert sand. By washing Jesus' feet, Mary gave him a bold commitment – that she was willing to serve him, to honor him, to attend to him, to care for him. She would not just sit at his feet and listen, but she was ready to get involved – she was ready to take her place in the community of faith and action that Jesus had built.

It was no small gesture. Women in Mary's days always kept their hair tied up and back – too busy working to show vanity or take the time to care for their hair. Just letting down her hair in the midst of this party would have shocked the guests present. That alone would have been a bold decision, even without the anointing – to ignore the social expectations of their day and let down her hair. How many of us are caught up in what others think and expect of us? How many of us follow the rules, do what is expected, don't like to make waves? There is certainly a time and place for order, but maybe we should also consider Mary, and when the time is right – maybe we could all stand to let down our hair a bit. Perhaps we should often

quit worrying about what others might say or think if they find out about our love and devotion to Jesus Christ – and just make a bold commitment, a bold decision to follow him.

It is interesting that Judas is the one to pipe up about the cost and extravagance of Mary's gift. For him, extravagance did not mean, beyond the bounds of reason and common practice, which is positive in this case, but rather Judas saw Mary's gift as wasteful, unnecessary, unwise. His motivation in pointing out the expense and extravagance of Mary's footwashing was not to exalt or lift her up for her generosity and devotion to Jesus, but to put her down by pointing out that the money could have been better spent serving the poor. The Bible tells us **(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.)**

According to John, Judas' motivation was to judge Mary. He sees the world through a lens which is black and white – you are either for Jesus or for the poor. You either love Jesus and “waste” your time, money and resources on him – which he clearly doesn't NEED; or you love the poor, who really need support, and you selflessly dedicate yourself to serving them. This “either-or” mentality did not sit well with Jesus, though it was just as common in his day as it is in ours today. Jesus' reaction to Judas opens doors to a new way of thinking – he is out-of-the-box. He surprises everyone when he answers:

“Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

Where Judas built boxes in his logic and thinking, Jesus tears down walls. He does not say that we should not love and serve the poor, then and now, who DO certainly need our support and our generosity. But Jesus says that we should also love and serve him. It is as true today as it was on that evening in Bethany. There are still the poor among us – there will always be others in need to help and serve in this world. But being in the presence of God is an amazing gift, spending time face to face with him is a blessing – a special occasion worthy of all the luxury and pomp that we dedicate to modern kings, politicians and celebrities. Or to ourselves. How many of us are willing to make bold and loving expressions of our commitment to Christ? Do we put God first, above our own needs and desires for money and things in this world? Would I be willing to sacrifice a year's worth of hard-earned salary just to say I love you and I will follow you to Jesus Christ? Would you?

And we must see that Jesus protects Mary (“leave her alone”). He stands up for her extravagant love and bold commitment by saying that she bought the perfume to anoint his body after he dies. He knows he will not be with them on the earth much longer, and he wants them to understand that they should always reserve a beautiful, generous and luxurious part of themselves just for him and his Father. With these final words, Jesus proves that there is truly a season for everything on the planet – I do not think of him as a man who pampers himself and enjoys being in the spotlight. But on this evening, he assumes his place center stage and by doing so, he makes Mary's timing holy and perfect. He glorifies her choice, her decision, her action. She took a risk by letting down her hair & washing his feet, she followed her heart, her intuition and she committed to love and serve Jesus – and he accepted her love and generosity as well as her faith and commitment. She may not even have known herself why she was anointing him on that night, in that place... but it turns out that her timing was absolutely perfect. No need to worry about getting it right or what others would think. Can't you just see the smile that must have crossed Jesus' lips as Mary knelt at his feet? Perhaps he was surprised, but he was certainly pleased – what an amazing gift! Extravagant love. Bold commitment. When was the last time we made Jesus smile? AMEN.