

Extravagant Love

This Gospel lesson is a wonderful example of the Christian life and extravagant love that Mary displays in her interaction with Jesus. I find it both powerful and instructive about the nature of Christian worship. In fact, to worship Jesus in this way has the potential to transform not only the individual but the entire Church!

It all begins at a **dangerous destination**. Jesus has already raised Lazarus from death to life and the people were flocking to him. That was a watershed event. The Jewish leaders feared for their political and religious lives and began to develop plans to kill both Jesus and Lazarus. (vs. 10) Going back to Bethany for this dinner was bound to bring out the crowd and further provoke the rage of the religious leaders in Jerusalem. At the end of the previous chapter it says, “Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who knew where Jesus was should report it, so that they could arrest him.” (John 11:55-57) The disciples are well aware of the dangers for Jesus and themselves and yet they go. John tells us in a matter-of-fact fashion that “**Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived ...**” That brings me to my first point regarding worship. Worshipping Jesus involves risk because loving Jesus involves risk. Risk-free love does not exist. Isn't it interesting that we want our worship to be free from any risks. We want our time with Jesus to be the place where we are safe and secure. Yet what we read throughout the entire New Testament is that followers of Jesus were anything but safe and secure. They connected faithfulness and love with risk. I wonder if we come to worship risking nothing do we also leave worship having received nothing? In our culture the impact of Christian churches continues to decline. Could it be that we are proud of our worship experiences but ashamed of proclaiming to the world that we are following Jesus?

Next we find Mary in a **position that proclaims** her devotion to Jesus. She is kneeling at the feet of Jesus. This is actually the third time we find her in that spot. Mary was center stage only three times in scripture and each time she is at our Lord's feet. She sat at his feet to hear His word (Luke 10:38-42). You will remember that her sister Martha is busy preparing a meal for Jesus and she objects to Mary just sitting there at the feet of Jesus when there is work to be done, but Jesus reminds Martha that Mary has made the best choice. Then she is at the feet of Jesus again filled with sorrow over the death of her brother Lazarus (John 11:32). Mary is clinging to Jesus as only consolation in the midst of great grief. And this time she is at the feet of Jesus offering extravagant love. It was a favorite place for Mary to be, at the feet of Jesus. She is there in times of sorrow and times of joy. She is there in times of receiving and in times of giving. She is there when the sun is shining and when the storm clouds are gathering. Being at the feet of Jesus is a sign of humility, a confession that He is Lord and I am not his peer. It is a place of learning where we can receive wisdom and understanding. It is a place where we can leave our prayers and cares. It is the place where we leave our crowns, our trophies and our offerings. As I read this text I imagined myself there with Mary. As I saw her at the feet of Jesus, I asked myself, when was the last time I was at the feet of Jesus? What keeps me away? Am I too busy, too proud, too self-reliant, too impressed with my own wisdom, too intent on solving my problems my way, or too dependent on my own power, accomplishments and contributions? Could it be that whatever keeps us from being at the feet of Jesus is a road block to genuine worship? I was with a man from our congregation two weeks ago who told me with great pride about his wife's faithfulness as a prayer warrior. He said almost every morning of his married life he awoke to the scene of his wife on her knees, deep in prayer, laying all her concerns at the

feet of Jesus. What a testimony! Being at the feet of Jesus is where we worship learn and serve. Jesus demonstrated that service as he put on that towel, took the basin of water and washed the feet of his disciples.

Then Mary offered the **sweet smell of love**. Mary's offering is very expensive perfumed oil. I wondered about the origin of this oil. Could this be the oil she first intended to anoint the body of her brother Lazarus? What was meant for the grief of death is poured out on the source of life, her savior, Jesus. The accounts of this story in Matthew and Mark are clear that this expensive nard is worth over 300 silver coins or a whole year's salary. Had Mary sparingly sprinkled a little of this expensive perfume on our Lord, there may have been no reaction, but she breaks the container so that she can pour out its entire contents on Jesus. In Matthew and Mark, it appears that she starts with His head, and lets the liquid run down on the rest of His body, ending up at His feet. Then she uses her hair to wipe up the excess ointment. Mary pours out her love on Jesus, by sacrificing the most precious thing she owns. It is truly a beautiful act, and all are blessed by it as the sweet smell of this fragrance fills the house. Sooner or later everyone would know what had been offered. Even those who were outside would know what had been offered within. When we give ourselves to Jesus the aroma is powerful. When a congregation is made up of committed Christians who are willing to give everything they have to Jesus, the scent is inviting. Even those outside of these walls become drawn to the fragrance within. People in our world are starving for Jesus, not just stories about Jesus. And when God's people give their very best to Jesus the aroma will draw people to Jesus. God inhabits the praises of His people... When we bring the sacrifice of praise, the fragrance is attractive. Don't wait for someone else to do it before you do it. Just like Mary did, we encourage one another with our sacrifice. When we hear of someone else's sacrifice it encourages us to do more for Him. You be that person. Bring your best to Jesus. Let Him inhabit your praises! A God honoring offering is not just precious to us; it is pleasant to others. When was the last time we made that kind of offering? It is easy to give little or nothing and feel that somehow we are justified, because we are upset with a pastor or a decision or a direction. Folks we are not here to give to pastors, decisions or directions. We are not here to give to visions, strategies or budgets. Our offerings can have only one focus, Jesus!

I read a powerful description of this scene and the lasting nature of Mary's offering of extravagant love. Listen to this, "The delicious fragrance ran down over his shining hair. It enfolded His body with its delightful aroma. Even his tunic and flowing undergarment were drenched with its enduring pungency. Wherever he moved during the ensuing days, the perfume would go with Him: Into the Last Supper; the Garden of Gethsemane; Herod's hall; Pilate's patio; even into the cruel hands of those who cast lots for his clothing." With each crack of the whip, Mary's gift was remembered. With each nail driven in, her love was felt, her witness remembered.

At the risk of dating myself, one of my favorite songs by James Taylor is "Shower The People". Now at the risk of dating yourselves, how many remember that song? I love the melody as well as the message. "Just shower the people you love with love, show them the way that you feel. Things are gonna work out fine if you only will." The song is about telling those that you love how you feel when they can hear it. It is sad to see friends and family gathered at a funeral home to pay their respects to the deceased person, knowing that much of what they said at the funeral, they never bothered to say to the person while they were alive. The flowers and other gestures

of love, the cards, letters or compliments would have been gladly received by the person during their life instead of at their death. Mary's offering is given in just that way, with the hope and promise of doing the greatest good with what she has to give.

Following Jesus as one of his disciples is not about how little we can do or how little it will take. Jesus tells his disciples that following him is about self-denial, bearing the cross and giving our life for the sake of his mission.

A medical missionary working with the Massai in Tanzania told me about the extravagant love of the Massai people who never forget the healing that he helped them to achieve. In the Massai culture it is never enough to express thanks one time, but to express it for a lifetime. Therefore every time he meets a Massai he has helped, they offer him a gift. In the midst of their poverty they give extravagantly, offering their last piece of produce or their last head of cattle. He told me that it is impolite to refuse their gift and he spends time trying to find ways of giving the gifts back to other family members. We still have much to learn from our brothers and sisters in Christ in other nations.

We move from the sweet smell of Mary's love to **Judas causing a stink**. Look at verses 4-6. "But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was going to betray him) said, "Why wasn't this perfumed oil sold for three hundred silver coins and the money given to the poor?" (Now Judas said this not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief. As keeper of the money box he used to take what was put into it.) Mary is not trying to attract attention, and it may be that she is hardly noticed until the smell of this fragrance drifts throughout the whole house. Then a most amazing (and distressing) thing occurs. The disciples of our Lord are angered by her actions, and they lash out at Mary for "needlessly wasting" this precious ointment on Jesus. They are not just rebuking Mary for her reckless waste of resources. Their words are also intended as a rebuke of Jesus. First, if this is truly a "waste," then Jesus must not be worth the value of the perfume. Second, it is our Lord who is being anointed. If it is wasteful and unnecessary, He should make her stop. Judas presents his case in a way that appeals to the higher motivations of his peers, and masks his own greed. The perfume is worth a year's wages. It could be sold, and the money given to the poor. It *should* be sold and the money given to the poor. A number of his fellow-disciples agree. They look upon Mary with anger and lash out at her. I can almost see her break down in tears as these men shame her for her selfless act of worship, for her extravagant love. It becomes clear to Jesus that Judas doesn't know the love of God, nor does he know how to show it. He is missing it and it is right there in front of him. I find it so interesting that Judas is willing to betray Jesus for 30 pieces of silver and Mary is willing to worship him with fragrance valued at 300 pieces of silver. As I reflected on that truth, I wondered, could we say that it takes very little to betray Jesus and yet it takes so much more to worship Him with the love He deserves. Shouldn't that be just the opposite? Shouldn't it take much more for us to betray Jesus and much less to worship him? I was forced to think of all the little ways in my life that I can so easily betray Jesus as if he wouldn't care so long as it was small. Jesus only cares about the big issues of life. Yet what he tells his disciples is that he cares about every thought word and deed. I was also forced to think about how much I prefer to worship Jesus with the things that cost me so little, a little time, a few words, a few songs and a tithe. The message seemed clear. Don't sell out on the little stuff and worship Him in more extravagant ways! 30 pieces of silver to betray him and 300 hundred pieces to worship him is certainly a thought provoking formula.

Finally Jesus speaks **words of praise and rebuke**. I would paraphrase Jesus' response this way: "That's enough! Stop it! Leave Mary alone. She has done nothing wrong, and everything right. She's kept this precious ointment to prepare my body for burial. You will have opportunities to minister to the poor in the future, but this is her one and only chance to minister to me in this way, since the time of my death is at hand." Matthew and Mark inform us that at least some of the other disciples angrily lash out at Mary for her extravagant expression of love. No one dares rebuke Jesus. On the other hand, Jesus does not hesitate to come to Mary's defense and rebuke his disciples.

I don't think for a moment that Jesus is minimizing the importance of caring for the poor. But I do believe that He is saying that the first priority is to worship him above all else. When Jesus comes first in our lives, we will have more love to share with the poor and even greater generosity in providing for them. Without that priority we do very little good and have far less impact on their lives than Jesus would prefer. We can easily get distracted by our own issues and agendas. Those other causes can easily displace the first place Jesus must have in our lives if we are to follow Him. When we fail to keep Jesus first we can easily do more harm than good even with the best intentions. Jesus says it clearly, Mary is right and they are wrong. Jesus blessed her gift and made sure that her selfless act would be remembered forever. Mark 14:9, "I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."

When you go home today take a look at the story of another woman who anoints the feet of Jesus in Luke 7:36-50. If we had more time today I would go into it in detail, but it adds the powerful component of confession and forgiveness to the mix of worship essentials.

Let me close with this story of Sam Rayburn, the late speaker of the House. The teenage daughter of a friend of his died suddenly one night. The Speaker of the House prayed for his friend and during the prayer sensed Jesus directing him to go and be with his friend. Early the next morning the man heard a knock on his door, and, when he opened it, there was Mr. Rayburn standing outside. The Speaker said, "I just came by to see what I could do to help." The father replied in his deep grief, "I don't think there is anything you can do, Mr. Speaker. We are making all the arrangements." "Well," Mr. Rayburn said, "have you had your coffee this morning?" The man replied that they had not taken time for breakfast. So Mr. Rayburn said that he could at least make coffee for them. While he was working in the kitchen, the man came in and said, "Mr. Speaker, I thought you were supposed to be having breakfast at the White House this morning." "Well I was," Mr. Rayburn said, "but I called the President and told him I had a friend who was in trouble, and I couldn't come." That morning the smell of coffee had the same aroma as the nard in our Gospel for today.

It is my prayer that today we remember from this text those essentials for worship: Risk boldly – Spend time at the feet of Jesus- Be extravagant in our giving – Let our worship move us to service – Never forget the power of confession and forgiveness. As we do that today remember the world is longing to experience that fragrant aroma.

In the name of Jesus

A-men

Steve Green sings this wonderful song.

One day a plain village woman
Driven by love for her Lord
Recklessly poured out a valuable essence
Disregarding the scorn
And once it was broken and spilled out
A fragrance filled all the room
Like a prisoner released from his shackles
Like a spirit set free from the tomb

Broken and spilled out
Just for love of you, Jesus
My most precious treasure
Lavished on thee
Broken and spilled out
And poured at your feet
In sweet abandon
Let me be spilled out
And used up for thee

Lord you were God's precious treasure
His loved and His own perfect Son
Sent here to show me the love of the Father
Just for love it was done
And though You were perfect and holy
You gave up Yourself willingly
You spared no expense for my pardon
You were used up and wasted for me