

Fifth Sunday in Lent – Holy Extravagance – John 12;1-8
April 7, 2019

Please pray with me. Extravagant God, pour out your love and mercy on us this day. Hear our prayers and open our hearts to know the joy of your presence and the joy of lavishing the gifts we receive from you upon others. Amen.

We need to begin with just a bit of the background behind this morning's story. More than once we have discussed the fact that each of the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, differ somewhat in how they present the stories of Jesus. This story is no different because it appears in all four gospels, but told in different ways, perhaps because, not unlike witnesses at an automobile accident or a crime scene, the sources each of the gospel writers listened to, told different versions of the story, based on what they saw. Matthew and Mark's versions have the most in common. John's description is very similar. Luke's description has more differences, yet shares details with John, such as the wiping off of Jesus' feet with the woman's hair. While it may be impossible to definitively discern whether there was more than one public anointing of Jesus during his ministry, it is evident that all the gospel writers knew of, and found significance in, such an act.

At any rate, the focal point of the story in all four gospels is the expensive perfume or nard that is used to anoint Jesus – the extravagance of it! This reminds me of the wedding at Cana where Jesus turned the water into wine and it was actually better wine than the party started out with. The wine steward remarked that generally they serve the good wine first and then the quality deteriorates as the guests become more inebriated, but in this case they served the best wine last. From there I began thinking about the things we do for those on the margins in the name of Jesus. In the name of Jesus; do we pick the best things to give those on the

margins, the homeless, the countless numbers, even in Buxton, who are food insecure – things we would like to be given? Quality items and fresh food, new toys or do we give them things we intend to discard anyway. Strange foodstuffs from our cupboards that perhaps we thought we would use when we bought them, but now they are close to the expiration date so – give them to the food pantry. Stores also for the most part give food close to or past the expiration date, dented cans, pastries no longer fresh or produce too unsightly to be sold.

I have not had a lot of experience with the Buxton Toy Box, but what I have had leads me to believe that Mia Dodge and her helpers try very hard to make Christmas special for the children in Buxton with nice toys, toys they ask for. They also provide a substantial Christmas dinner for those who qualify. I believe Jesus would approve heartily of their efforts – perhaps loving extravagance?

Holy extravagance doesn't only pertain to material items in my opinion. I have spent a considerable amount of time thinking about our time together here as I was discerning whether or not to retire. I have seen this church in action and from my position as pastor I have seen many instances of holy extravagance that I cannot share without breaking confidences and then I have seen many I can talk about. For one, our warm welcome to all who enter through our doors. You are all so quick to speak with anyone who comes, make them welcome, offer them coffee and people mention that to me when I meet with them as I try to do after they have visited a few times. Gordon and I attended several different churches during January and February and most were rather unpleasant experiences. If we were lucky a person sitting next to us would say hello, but I didn't feel that I would want to attend any of those churches on a regular basis or become a member. I might give them a second try, but I have a feeling the welcome would still not be there – certainly not like

Tory Hill Meetinghouse. I am sure we would definitely need to be the proactive ones.

I have seen your generosity with the Buxton Toy Box, Souper Bowl Sunday and other collections for the food pantry and meals for folks like how you all banded together to provide meals for Sonia and her boys last fall. Holy extravagance in a big way. While I was away, I know Rick and Linda, Nancy, Stacie and Kathleen and perhaps others gathered around George and Roxanne and helped them through a rough patch and I can relate these without breaking any confidences.

And the way you have treated me/us. I came here September 1, 2014 as a newly minted MDiv and I know I have made my share of mistakes – like assuming when you told me you had lunch with the annual meeting that it was a pot luck because I had never heard of brown bagging for a church event. No one really said anything the first year and now I think you have forgiven me for that. And then on June 5, 2016 at my installation here. It was raining very hard, there were a large number of clergy attending, all with robes and stoles to don and you were trying to prepare refreshments in the back of the sanctuary. The elderly friend I asked to give the charge to the church decided to berate you at length about the fact her daughter had pushed her wheelchair inside and run back to move the car, but no one spoke to her or welcomed her. Uh Betty, don't you think there was confusion enough??? No one gave me a hard time about that incident either and I was able to convince her later that this was not the norm.

If you have wanted me to change things you have been gentle about asking or maybe I have been too naïve to realize anything was wrong, but I choose to call it holy extravagance on your part.

Back to Mary and her extravagance. The perfume, a very expensive perfume called nard, is an herb that grows in the foothills of the Himalayas and the part of the plant growing underground is rich in the precious essential oil. In the time of Jesus, the pound of pure nard that Mary used to anoint Jesus' feet would have cost about 300 denarii which amounted to nearly a years wages. Judas Iscariot, the disciple who would betray Jesus, complained that the perfume should have been sold and the money given to the poor. This wasn't because Judas cared about the poor – he handled the common purse and he stole from it for his own benefit. And it is not because Jesus doesn't care about the poor when we hear him say, “the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me.”

You see, the disciples were always with Jesus, until they deserted him at the cross, but Jesus came to Bethany to spend time with his close friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus because, while not a part of the twelve, they were followers and in fact were closer to him. He could relax with them – they knew what was going to happen even though the disciples kept refusing to believe when Jesus told them he would be crucified.

Extravagance scares us. It scared Judas. And extravagance, God's extravagance, can save us. Mary anointed Jesus so extravagantly because she understood, and did not fear, the extravagant mercy of God. May we strive to be as extravagant as God – and - Mary in our daily living. Amen.