

## Extravagant Gratitude

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John 12:1-8 NRSV

12 Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 3 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. 4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5 "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" 6 (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.) 7 Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8 You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Taken with last week's story about the prodigal Father who spends until there is nothing left, here we are with a real-life example of prodigal love. Let's not miss that it is one of the female disciples who understands this kingdom principle in a way the men seem unable to grasp.

Have you ever been the recipient of extravagant generosity? How did it make you feel? Loved, embarrassed, obliged to reciprocate? Our self-consciousness is even greater when someone is generous to us just because they love us, not because we are in great need.

The way John tells this story seems intended to activate our conflicting feelings and beliefs. On the one hand, we see what Mary is doing and think, "I would do the same for someone who saved my beloved brother!" But then Judas asks his question and we may think, "Hey that's a good point. Isn't this a little over the top, given all the needs in the world?" And then John tells us what Judas' true motive is. If we were so quick to agree with his point, what are our true motivations?

**We can "be right" about something but still fail to celebrate when someone else decides to "do right."** Maybe it's because we are ashamed of the fact that it never occurred to us to be so generous and lavish in our love!

Maybe it's because we've learned to be cynical. And make no mistake, cynicism is *learned*. Cynicism is probably the most corrosive force in the world. That is why it is important to cultivate gratitude as the antidote. And that is what Mary is doing. She is demonstrating what happens when we live a life that is in every way full. It is full precisely because she has not only seen Jesus live an extravagantly generous life, but because she knows that as his disciple, she is supposed to live that way too!

Core

**Extravagant gratitude honors God, no matter what anyone else thinks.**

I need to say a word about caring for the poor here. This is not a text to justify ignoring the poor. If we use it that way – and oh goodness have I heard people use it that way – then we ignore the whole witness of scripture which is unequivocal about God’s concern for the poor. That church at its most faithful has always demonstrated this... and still had plenty of resources to lavish on expressing love for our Lord. Honoring Jesus or blessing the poor, like Loving God or loving neighbor, is a false choice. It is not, and never has been, a zero sum game. That is just something we have made up for ourselves to justify the way we “play small” in life and in love.

Call

Let’s try to put ourselves in Mary’s place. **If you could express your gratitude to Jesus in a tangible way, what would it look like?** (fancy dinner? create a piece of art or other gift?)

Now imagine: Would you be willing to do that for someone else in Christ’s name? Even a complete stranger?

Prayer