

March 13, 2016
John 12:1-8
Pastor Elizabeth Kelsey
Creekside COB

“Extravagant Gratitude”

On March 16, 2007, for the first time in its 23 year history, there was a three way tie on the game show, Jeopardy. Mathematicians calculate the odds of this occurrence to be one in 25 million. But what a mathematical calculation cannot take into account is the graciousness and generosity of someone like Scott Weiss. In the ‘Final Jeopardy’ round, the second and third place players both had \$8,000. Scott had a little over \$12,000 going into this last question. If you know the game, players must make their bids before they even hear what the final question is. Most often on Jeopardy, the winner makes a bet on that final question that leads to at least a victory of one dollar. It is, after all, a competition.

But you could see excitement on Scott's face as he calculated that a three-way tie could be possible. Scott, a computer science prof, bet exactly enough money so that if the other two players both bet their entire \$8,000 and got the question right, then all three players would have a total of \$16,000. That's exactly what happened. Scott forfeited his victory so that all three players could be winners. It was a moment of pure joy made possible by an act of generosity and graciousness.

You may not see the relationship between the Jeopardy story and Mary's remarkable gift of gratitude to Jesus. But it reminds us that there are opportunities all around us to open our hearts and do something extraordinary. The odds of a three way tie in Jeopardy may have been one in 25 million. And like Scott, Mary understood that she had a chance that may never come again.

Here's the context. Not long ago, Mary and Martha's brother, Lazarus, died. The sisters called Jesus to come, but he came too late to save

him. Lazarus was already buried three days. The neighborhood was in full mourning. Jesus insisted the grave be opened, and in a loud voice said “Lazarus, come forth.” Incredibly Lazarus stood up and continued to live his life with gratitude. But all who witnessed that miracle were shaken by the power of Jesus to bring the dead to life, and many continued to follow Jesus around.

In today’s scene, the raising of Lazarus is in the background, the crucifixion of Jesus in the foreground. It is six days before Passover, and two grateful sisters give Jesus a banquet to thank him for bringing their brother back to life. Martha serves the meal, and Jesus and Lazarus relax at the table. Mary enters the room, kneels at Jesus’ feet and pours on them a whole pound of spikenard, an imported and expensive perfume. It was no afterthought. Mary had spent three hundred denarii on that gift for Jesus. Three hundred denarii was the equivalent to an average year’s salary in Palestine, or \$20,000 in today’s money!

Mary’s action was scandalous on two counts; first for pouring away three hundred denarii’s worth of perfume, and second, because she let down her hair to dry his feet. Showing her hair in public was something no respectable woman would do in the presence of any man except her husband. Can you hear the collective gasp as the guests observed this scene?

The scripture only records two responses. One was from Judas -- “why didn’t you spend this money on the poor?” In other words, “you silly woman, how could you waste all this money on perfume!” The second and puzzling response to Mary’s action was from Jesus. “Leave her alone. She bought it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.” It wasn’t that Jesus ignored the poor. His instruction to the rich young ruler was “Go sell all you have and give to the poor.” He told the disciples “If you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me.” But Jesus recognized the love and sensitivity of Mary to what had happened and what was to come. Jesus had announced he was to die in Jerusalem, but his followers didn’t seem to understand or accept his words as truth. But Mary knew the heart of Jesus and understood the murderous intent of the Pharisees toward Jesus. Hers was an act of extravagant holy caring, given at the appropriate

moment. She anointed the feet of the one to whom she owed everything.

Those of you who attended the “Courageous and Outrageous” workshop yesterday will understand when I say Mary made herself very vulnerable. Her extravagance was misunderstood. Judas felt it was inappropriate and wrong. John, the gospel writer, makes a not-so-nice comment that suggests Judas was known to steal from the disciples’ treasury. Another interpretation is that Judas was a secret Zealot who wanted to force Jesus to become the King who would eventually save the Jews from bondage to Rome. ¹ Whatever his motive, in his eyes Mary’s act was irrational.

Osceola McCarty of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, may have been irrational, too. She had dropped out of school in sixth grade to care for her sick aunt who lived with the family. From that early age she became a washerwoman, and for the next 75 years she washed clothes from sun up to sun down. She scrubbed the dark clothes on a washboard and boiled the white ones in a big black pot before hanging them on the clothesline in the backyard.

The washerwoman never owned a car. She walked everywhere she went, pushing a shopping cart about one mile to get groceries. She rode with friends to attend the Friendship Baptist Church. She did not subscribe to any newspaper -- that was too extravagant.

At age 87, she gave \$150,000 to the University of Southern Mississippi for scholarships to underprivileged kids. She had saved and invested all those years. With dimes to represent 10 percent, she set aside one dime for her church, one dime for each of three relatives, and six dimes, for Southern Mississippi University. In 1996, she was awarded an honorary doctorate from Harvard. She died in 1999 of cancer, but her cleaning work, in a real sense, lives on in students awarded scholarships. ²

Was this an irrational extravagance at the cost of a reasonably comfortable life? Maybe. But Osceola acted out of deep concern for

¹ Rev. Barbara Hite, illustration from www.homileticsonline.com

² Rev. Steve Davis, First Baptist Church, Carrollton GA, shared this story with www.homileticsonline.com

children who, like her, could end up as a washerwoman or stuck in other undesirable jobs because they couldn't afford an education. She worked toward something she herself was denied. In spite of -- or maybe because of -- her lack of schooling, she gave extravagantly for the sake of providing a richer life for underprivileged kids.

Patricia Long, pastor in Berkeley, California says "acts of humility and love are empowering! They remind us that, though power, control and domination are the ways of the world, there are some places where simple gestures of kindness and caring still count, still make a difference . . . Whenever a person stands up for love, the world notices -- the presence of God becomes more visible."³

We need to ask ourselves, where does the presence of God become visible in our lives? Our honoring of Jesus may not involve money or perfume. But by allowing God to open our eyes, we can see where God's presence is needed. Fred Barnard quoted a high percentage of people who consider themselves lonely. Those people can't be far away. Even an acknowledgement can be a beautiful thing to someone feeling deep loneliness.

Here's a Presidential story of God's presence becoming visible. Cary and I remember distinctly the day Nixon resigned as president -- we were on the way home from our honeymoon and stopped at a motel to watch the announcement on our lobby TV. A few years after his resignation, Richard Nixon came back to Washington DC for the funeral of Hubert Humphrey. The room was packed, but one man, Richard Nixon, stood all alone against a wall. Even though President Gerald Ford had given him full pardon, people still saw Nixon as political poison. But then, President Jimmy Carter entered the building. He greeted friends and colleagues, and then saw Nixon standing off alone. His heart went out to him, and in full view of everyone, President Carter walked straight over to Richard Nixon. "Welcome home, Mr. President! Welcome home!" That simple act of compassion was a turning point for the former president, because it allowed him to regain some of his stature as an elder statesman.

³ Patricia Long, illustration from www.homileticonline.com

The truth is, we are all welcomed into the family of God only because of God's extravagant generosity and grace, forgiveness and compassion in Jesus Christ.

The act of honoring Jesus, like Mary, will "fill the house (or church)" with a certain fragrance -- the fragrance of love and devotion to one who has loved us so lavishly and in such a costly way. Three hundred denarii can't begin to touch it. Maybe Mary overdid her gift. But our tendency is often underdoing our expression of love and devotion to God. How do we show our gratitude for Jesus' act of grace? Do we take Jesus' love for granted? Do we celebrate it only at certain times? Do we express our gratitude? Jesus brought life into Mary's world and she was grateful. Pray that we will not "underdo" our celebration of Jesus costly and extravagant gift to us as we seek to honor him this Lent.⁴

Let me end with this prayer written by someone in response to the story of Mary.

Lord, I am haunted by Mary's unreasonable extravagance as she poured the precious ointment on your feet. Part of me agrees with those who rebuked her, that the money could have been better spent -- in feeding the poor or paying the bills or supporting the church. But, unembarrassed, you accepted her gift of ointment and tears, and the house was filled with the fragrance. Teach me, Lord, that there are times when love requires something more than a rigid timetable or a balanced check book.

Lord of the dance, help me to join you in fresh and spontaneous responses to life. Let me to be vulnerable, to make the unexpected gift, letting go of the fear for others' disapproval. Mary knew that her moment had come and might never come again. Help me to know when it is time to break open the spikenard and fill the house with the fragrance of love. May I not take your extravagant gift of eternal life lightly or for granted, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

⁴ Frank G. Honeycutt, *Costly extravagance*, www.homileticsonline.com