

This is a story of extravagant love—of fine perfume poured out in grateful response. Of giving by someone so filled with gratitude for her brother Lazarus' life that she doesn't count the cost. It's a story for us on this Pledge Sunday, as we consider what we will give in grateful response to the life we have been given.

As we approach holy week, the shadow of the cross falls across this scene from John's gospel that is set in Bethany. Jesus is preparing to give himself as the ultimate sacrifice for God's love of the world. And he finds himself on the receiving end of an extravagant act of love and devotion. It's a scene filled with tenderness and intimacy between Jesus and Mary that has set within it talk of disciple betrayal and is interrupted with an ominous act of anointing that foretells Jesus' death.

This story gets our attention and it should for it's extravagance, the sacrifice, the betrayal, the devotion and a celebration in the face of death.

John sets us in Bethany 6 days after the Passover at the home of Lazarus – Lazarus the same - the resurrected Lazarus – the one to whom Jesus called, “Lazarus, come out” after he had been dead and buried in the tomb for 4 days. There must have been much rejoicing – a once dead beloved friend and brother was alive again.

But, at the same time these friends were rejoicing and celebrating life, some Pharisees were thinking and plotting death – not just 1, but 2. They were plotting the death of Jesus and of Lazarus. Jesus was threatening b/c of all the people that were following him. The Pharisees had worked hard to achieve their positions. And, their positions held powerful Rome at arms length from scattering the Jewish people. They had worked hard for the Roman religious tolerance of Jewish rule and law, so long as it did not oppose or propose a threat to the emperor. Jesus talked of righteousness and justice and forgiveness. The 'kingdom' of God that he talked about would upset the fine balance achieved by the Pharisees. If the people followed Jesus, and what he said and did, Rome just might lose their tolerating attitudes once and for all. And, so, the Pharisees plotted to kill Jesus – sacrifice one for the good of all was there stance. Knowing he was in danger, Jesus went underground – he withdrew. And, the newly restored to life well, Lazarus was a testimony to Jesus' power. Neither he, nor his friends were going to be quiet about this miracle – and more and more people came to see Jesus. And, so , the Pharisees and chief priests plotted to kill Lazarus, too.

It is sandwiched between these two plots of death that Lazarus, Martha, Mary and Jesus celebrate life. Mary combined grief and hope in her offering to Jesus. Mary found joy in the midst of sorrow, life in the midst of death. Mary, whose tears of grief had covered Jesus' feet just a short time before, now is overcome with devotion and smoothes an expensive bottle of ointment on Jesus' feet. And, then, the unthinkable, - in a scandalous act of intimacy, she lets her hair down and wipes Jesus feet with it. This was unheard of in Jesus' time. Only a husband would see the hair of a woman not wrapped tightly around her head (and/or covered?) Now, I'm not suggesting Mary was anything beyond a devoted disciple to Jesus. I only say this for two reasons: 1. it shows the utter devotion,

the desire to give something of great importance to Jesus, and 2. her actions are risky in their extravagance, it warranted sharp reprimand at the very least.

And, the reprimand comes – but not in quite the way that we might expect. Judas Iscariot seeks to discredit and denounce Mary, not for her behavior, but for squandering a valuable resource – something that he says could have been put to better use, helping many more people. John casts doubt on Judas’ real motives, but, Judas brings out an important point. Mary’s action hurt - it hurt Judas to see this perfume – this precious resource ‘wasted’ – maybe he winced thinking about all the hungry and naked people that might have been clothed and fed. Maybe he winced because he saw and felt money slipping through his fingers. Maybe it hurt to see Mary’s extravagant act of gratitude and love for Jesus knowing that he would not do the same. Whatever the cause, Judas felt pain at Mary’s offering.

Parting with *our* money is usually that way, and we need to acknowledge this. There’s a little bit of Judas’ greed and love of money in each of us. And there’s a strong sense of entitlement in our society. A strong sense of holding on to what is “ours”.

Whatever Judas’ motivation for saying what he did, he raises a point that we are considering ourselves as we prepare our pledges—we are called to remember the poor, and make sure that our money doesn’t just stay here—it’s meant to be poured out for the love of the world. With valuable perfume, and slave-like devotion she shows her gratitude to God who not only calls us to new life in Christ, but enables us to bring life to others. For over 150 years, with your financial gifts and your time, FT has been helping the poor, the hungry, the haunted and grieved.

What is the most valuable thing that you have?  
Can you imagine pouring it out in humble gratitude to God?

Did you know giving is freeing? In lavishly pouring out the perfume, Mary experienced no pain, no sacrifice – it’s strikingly the opposite – there’s a sense of her own pleasure in the giving, her own complete heedlessness of the cost of this perfume. Spilling over with gratitude, she is moved to extravagant love.

Mary offered something very valuable to Jesus in gratitude for her brother’s life. Mary’s extravagant gesture filled the whole house with fragrance. May it be so with our gifts—that our grateful response to God’s love is poured out so generously that it fills our life here with heady new possibilities. Generous giving changes us – brings us into God’s own life. Giving freely, pouring out our love, we come to know the joy and freedom of God’s own love, poured out for us

So come to the table, where God’s love and God’s life are poured out for you. And on this Pledge Sunday, pour out your love in grateful return.

Amen.