

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church
3rd Sunday in Lent
February 28, 2016
Mark 14:3-9

TRULY BOLD! TRULY EXTRAVAGANT!

Are there any Downton Abbey fans in the room? No need for confession, but if you are fan, you are probably anticipating the final episode of the whole series. If you're not a fan, you've probably at least heard about the Crawley family, members of England's aristocracy at the turn of the twentieth century. Sometimes the biggest decision of their day was what to wear for lunch, and what to change into for dinner, all with the assistance of their private chambermaid or valet. Of course, there are occasions in this drama when the Crawleys are confronted with some of the same human struggles that we all face. Their resources may be different for they are immersed in extravagance at every turn.

Drama always has some comic relief, and we often find ourselves chuckling at situations, certain lines, and especially the different personalities that make up this family.

I more than chuckled at a recent episode when this family decided to open their mansion to the village people to raise money for the local hospital. The Countess Grantham and her daughters, Lady Mary and Lady Edith were to be the docents, except they did not know very much about their surroundings.

"What other buildings did the architect of Downton Abbey design?" asked one villager. Lady Edith took a moment to ponder and answer, "Well, he designed many other large and beautiful buildings." Lady Mary was so relieved when the dowager countess came into the library just in time to answer the question about who started this voluminous collection of books. "It was the fourth earl of Grantham that began this library!" Lady Mary was off the hook, she thought. But then the next question came, "And what were the Earl's favorite collections? (referring to the books in the library). The dowager answered, "Oh, his favorite collections were horses and women." The docents did not shine that day. They knew little about the art, had never noticed the mantle carvings, missed the elegance of the chandeliers, and anxiously counted the minutes until these inquisitive villagers would be gone.

Surrounded by extravagance, yet so unaware and missing what was in the room with them everyday.

How do you react when you are in the midst of extravagance? Have you ever thought about that question? Do you soak it up? Do you love it? Does it depend on who is with you? Are you taken aback? Are you embarrassed by it? Do you shake your head and roll your eyes?

If you had been a guest that night at Simon's home in Bethany, would you have thought the woman's act was extravagant? How would you have reacted to this woman who carried this jar of expensive oil, smashed it, and poured all the oil upon Jesus' head? The writer of Mark's Gospel tells us about some of the reactions in the room. The guests are angry. "Oh my gosh! What a waste! Did that just really happen?" Where would you have been in your thinking in that company of dinner guests?

We are told in the commentaries that three hundred denarii were approximately a year's wages in those days. Many have tried to interpret denarii into today's money. It's hard to do. The point is that the oil was very expensive. It could have been sold, and the money put to some use.

I imagine that many of us have had some experience where a display of extravagance has made us uncomfortable. We're not certain how to react. We are concerned about wastefulness, how something seems overdone. Do we address it? The answer is "Yes!" It's very appropriate to address wastefulness, consumption, and how things are being used. It's important that wastefulness be addressed. Perhaps, the guests in Simon's home were reacting to this woman's extravagance, and angry about the way this expensive oil was being poured out, and wasted. Can you relate to this response? I can!

It was a blessing for me to serve as pastor of a multicultural congregation for thirteen years. I will never forget the first baptism. The young couple and the grandmother had been in this country for about a year, coming from West Africa. At their child's one year birthday, they requested baptism, attended the class, and we prepared for that special occasion. They asked if they could host the fellowship hour that Sunday, and I said, "That would be wonderful!"

The Sunday arrived, and so did the couple, their child, the grandmother, and sixty of their closest family and friends, all dressed in coordinated clothing that had been designed, and made especially for this occasion. "That's a little extravagant," I thought.

As I looked into the sanctuary, there were flowers everywhere. We had to bring in chairs from the garage; many members did not get to sit in their regular seats that morning. The baptism went fine, and as I prepared to carry the baby through the sanctuary introducing our newest member, the grandmother started to sing and dance, and then their family and friends joined in, and the whole service turned into singing and dancing in the aisles. The father picked up the offering plates, and passed them around the congregation twice. I panicked because you need session approval if you do more than one offering.

After the baptism, the group settled reverently to hear the word of the Lord.

By that time, however, "decently" and "in order" had gone out the window, and all manner of "Presbyterian" had been shaken. (Of course, this couple was Presbyterian also, very active in their church in back home.) Following the service, the celebration continued with more dancing and singing, and a three-hour fellowship.

I had already decided that I would be meeting with the worship committee to review the baptism protocol.

But then the wise, and insightful grandmother came into my office. She had been watching me, and the dismay I was unable to hide. She said, "Pastor, what a wonderful day of praising God. Our child has been sealed by the Holy Spirit today, welcomed into the Church, and made Christ's own forever. Pastor, we could never match all that the Lord has done for us. But we can praise God, and we can celebrate!"

"Oh!" I said. And in that moment, I knew that I was the one who missed what was truly extravagant in the room that day. Surrounded by the extravagance of the sacrament of baptism, and all that Jesus did for us. The family did not miss that, and did what they could. They praised, worshipped, gave their offerings, and celebrated extravagantly.

I think the guests at Simon's house missed the true extravagance in the room that evening. The woman did not.

This word “extravagant” provides us with some interesting considerations.

If you click on the dictionary or thesaurus in Word on your computer, you will see the definitions that impose the connotations we have on this word; folly, overindulgence, excessive, luxurious. But, if you look up the word the good old fashion way in Merriam Webster, you’re offered a little more.

You’re given the Latin origin of the word which means “extra wandering,” “more than one would expect,” “exceeding the limits of reason or necessity,” “going beyond.” Then it goes on to give the connotations that have become associated with the word; lacking in balance or restraint, lavish, excessive.¹

If you give this some thought.....

- Do you believe that what Jesus did for us and continues to do is more than one would or should expect?
- Do you believe that his death exceeded the limits of reason, and what we think is necessary?
- Do you believe that Jesus goes way beyond what we can humanly comprehend?
- Do you believe that Jesus has always lacked some restraint?
- So, might you conclude that Jesus is extravagant, truly extravagant?

The woman who entered the room was aware of the extravagance of Jesus. Somehow, she knew that there was not enough oil in the world to pour out upon the one who would pour his life for us.²

The woman did not answer her critics. She praised her Lord, who would give his life for her. She anointed his head with precious oil, this same head that was soon to be crowned with thorns, this same body that was soon to be flogged and pierced, and laid in a cold, dark tomb.

The story of this unnamed woman, who foreshadows the death of Jesus, when all the others wanted to deny it, is sandwiched in between the chief priests and scribes who are plotting Jesus’ death, and the disciple who has followed Jesus, but is now planning betrayal. Here is an act of pure love and worship sandwiched in between plotting and betrayal, fleeing and denial. Ched Myers writes that this woman is not avoiding Jesus’ death, but anticipating it with her anointing. In this, she has done what she could, and demonstrated her solidarity with the way of the cross.³

And we will remember this disciple in God’s new creation every time the Gospel is proclaimed.

The biblical scholar, Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza writes that the fact that we don’t know this woman’s name is a reflection of the writer’s patriarchal tradition of not naming women. But the truth is, just as Jesus stated, that her memorable, and extravagant act of love speaks louder than any name or any word. In that moment, this woman responded to her Lord doing what she could, pouring out and anointing with oil the one who has always given boldly and extravagantly that we might have life.⁴

¹ Merriam Webster

² Susan Miller

³ Ched Myers

⁴ Susan Miller

Jesus said to the guests, “Yes, of course, I am the one who told the rich man to sell all his possessions and give them to the poor, and yes, you should give to the poor, and by the way, have you given to the poor? But she is doing a good thing, and her story will be told as my story is told. ”

There are other examples in scripture of extravagant acts in praise of God.

Hannah was certainly bold, and extravagant in taking that child, Samuel, whom she longed for, to the temple to place him in the care of Eli. She gave Samuel to the Lord, who had given to her what she thought was beyond possible. And if Hannah was questioned about this extravagant act, we know what she would say, “My heart exults in the Lord, who gave me what I never imagined could be given”

In dying on the cross, Jesus does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. He saves us!

So, what can we do? What do we do as followers of Jesus?

Jesus is popular these days. Many who claim him throw around Jesus’ name often, and sound as if they want to be aligned with him. But will these people stick around when, and if they ever understand what Jesus is truly asking of his followers? Will they stay as close to Jesus as this unnamed woman if they start hearing things that they’d prefer to push aside, and ignore? Will they miss what is truly bold and extravagant about Jesus?

Will we stick around? Will we stay close? Will we witness boldly, and love our Lord extravagantly? What exactly does that look like in your life and in mine? What does it look like to serve, and worship Jesus Christ today, the one who was, and is, and will always be truly bold, truly extravagant?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!

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