



University Christian Church – Austin

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## **Holy Waste**

Lent 5, c, 3/21/2010

John 12:1-8

If you were to go out behind the church to 21st St. go one block east and then another block south you would be on the grounds of the Blanton Museum. Walk on inside go up to the second floor to the European artists section and you will find a beautiful little painting by Bernardo Butinone of our setting in the Gospel of John this morning. The large black and red checkerboard tiled floor and the curved arches in white plaster look a lot more like Butinone's 15<sup>th</sup> century Milanese villa than they do a rough hillside cottage east of Jerusalem. Jesus is seated at the end of the table loaded with what look to be heavy meats and such. His right foot is being gently lifted by Mary in what will become her famous act of devotion.

Bible scholars tell us that this painting is, indeed, probably quite inaccurate with respect to the historical scene. They tell us that Jesus and the disciples in Bethany were probably reclining on the floor around a very low table eating from a common bowl. Most likely their food consisted of chunks of flatbread that were torn into pieces and get dipped into a spiced olive oil just like you will be served when you visit the Middle East today.

Then Mary comes into the room and begins to annoint Jesus' feet with a fabulously expensive pound of nard. Nard, or spikenard, was the favorite perfume

of antiquity. It got its name from the spike-like shape of the root and the spiny stem of the plant that was found in the Himalayan Mountains. The Mediterranean world loved the smell of this ointment and paid the incredible expense it took both to produce the ointment and then to transport it-- imagine all those many hundreds of miles.

What was the cost? Something in the neighborhood of \$30,000 today.<sup>i</sup> That is a lot of money for a group of homeless vagabond's meandering through the countryside and living off the hospitality of generous people. The Gospel of John puts the questioning of this expense in the mouth of Judas the betrayer of Jesus. In the Gospel of Matthew it is other disciples who question this apparent waste. And the Gospel of Mark it was some anonymous group that was indignant.<sup>ii</sup> \$30,000 was a lot of money. I don't know about you, but if I had been there I would have questioned the expense myself.

Jesus was constantly concerned for the plight of the sick and the poor so we should not conclude that he has somehow lost his bearings. No, Jesus is trying to teach his disciples -- and that includes us now -- something about what it means to give, to give extravagantly from a thankful heart.

Having worked with a few church budgets in my day, I can tell you that watching our dollars carefully is a hallmark of Christian communities. Rarely can we easily afford to splurge in the way that our glad hearts would encourage us to.

But as we look around, it is clear that some of our fore bearers gave extravagantly out of their generous hearts in order to build this thing fine sanctuary that has become the worship center of our life together as a congregation. Stories could be told about the people who sacrificed significantly of their limited family resources in order to purchase a craftsman's time to painstakingly cut little pieces

of colored glass and lead them together to tell stories of our faith. Why, in the last few years many of you gathered here have given generously and extravagantly in order to purchase an elevator so that everyone can have access to our church and to purchase the magnificent new organ that we enjoy every Sunday. Any one of those projects could have been scuttled if every dollar had to be handled with a clear-headed and calm-hearted prudence.

There is a time for calculation in the Christian journey, but there is also a time for extravagant giving. A religious faith that moves narrowly within the limits of what can be named as reasonable or prudent is stifling to the expansive and the over-awed experience of the Christian soul touched by a movement of the Holy Spirit!

That is what Jesus clearly saw the abundant heart of Mary

-- moved by her friendship with Jesus;

--moved by Jesus' recent bringing of her brother Lazarus back from the dead;

--moved by Jesus teaching of the love and guiding presence of God. And so moved was she to honor the spirit she sees in Jesus, that she does this -- this overly extravagant act of love that certainly is a form worship itself.

The history of humankind at its best is the history of women and men who likewise spent themselves lavishly in the service of some higher calling;

--in the committed sometimes reckless sharing of their faith;

--in the untiring devotion to some noble cause in hopes of a better tomorrow;

--in relentless service to a community.... for which to them their sacrifice seemed a small price to pay.

Yesterday in the sanctuary here was a beautiful and very expensive wedding. As Sally Herring can tell you, many of the wedding celebrations that surround the

ceremonies that take place here, cost more than that pound of spikenard. And while many decry the way some businesses take advantage of those celebrating a wedding, but these are the special times in life that cry out for an irrational exuberance!

My father was a very frugal man. My mother often used another term for that characteristic. Well, my parents had five children, myself and four sisters. To a frugal man the idea of financing four big wedding celebrations down the road must have been upsetting some level. I remember the day he sat at our dinner table and said to my sisters whose bedrooms were up on the second floor of our house – that when they were ready to get married he had put a ladder in the outbuilding that they could use to elope! But he had a big smile on his face when he said it and we all knew he was kidding. We knew dad well enough to know that when it came to those highest and best moments of life you don't allow an accountant's spirit to quench the joyous spirit of a celebration!

Now, at this moment your preacher is preaching to himself, too, as our family gets ready for Marie's wedding this fall.

Mary's act of spontaneous extravagance to honor Jesus is actually matched by many followers of Jesus... though not in so visibly dramatic a way. Throughout the ages generations of Christians have regularly given 10% of their income to the work of Christ's Church. They are the tithers, and God bless them every one! A lifetime of such giving is much more than many pounds of spikenard.

Occasionally you even hear of someone who enters the category of being a reverse tither, that is, such as the woman I know of who lives on 10% of her income and gives away 90% of her income to worthy causes such as her church, orphanages and hospitals in faraway places. The word is, by the way, that she's one

of the happiest people you will ever know because she knows that she is doing God's work in the world.

The reasonable and prudent side of us looks at each transaction in life in such a careful, measured way. We have need of certain things in order to live and to live fully. True enough. But God has also created us with a hunger, a desire, to share ourselves in an extravagant way, giving of ourselves thoroughly. If we don't have those opportunities – or as is usually the case- we don't take such opportunities, we will spiritually wither.

In order to be able to give generously to others, we must first be able to let go... to let go of some things that we love if we are going to be able to grasp the greater joy God has in store for us. Much like the trapeze artist who must have the courage and the commitment to let go of the trapeze with which she built up her speed & height, if she is going to be able to fly over to grasp the next. When you stop and think about it, this learning to let go of that which is comfortable and familiar is the whole point of our special Lenten spiritual disciplines.

There's a story about a man who lived on the Greek Island of Crete. He was very sick and knew he was dying, and he said to his wife, "I have loved this island, sometimes it has been like heaven to me and all I want to do now is to die with a piece of it in my hand." So his wife stepped outside and dug a handful of soil and brought it in and placed it in his hand, and the man took the soil and clutched it so his breast and died.

In a moment he found himself surrounded by light, at the very gates of heaven. A voice said to him, "Welcome, my friend, leave your handful of earth behind now and follow me now into heaven." But the man said, "No! this handful of soil is all I have left of my blessed homeland and I will never let it go, not even to get into heaven!"

So the man stayed outside the gate, clutching his handful of soil, thinking how unfair God was to demand that he empty his hand of the thing that meant the most to him. One day, God appeared to him in the form of a stern judge, saying in a foreboding voice, "Unless you let go of that dirt, you may not enter the kingdom of heaven." But the man said, "This isn't dirt, it is the soil of my beloved Crete and I will never let it go."

Time passed, and again God appeared to him, this time in the form of a kind woman who spoke to him very softly and said, "My friend, we need you to join us.. .won't you let go of your small handful of soil and come now?" But again the man refused.

Time passed, long time and as it did the soil in the man's hand became dry as dust and began to sift through his fingers anyway, and his hand ached from the effort of holding it until he was in agony. Once more he heard the invitation to empty his hand and enter the gates of heaven and this time he said bitterly, "Alright, I am broken now and my soil is slipping away, I will come." So he let go of what he had been holding and the gates were opened wide and the man took one look and began to weep with joy, for there on the other side lay the whole of his beloved island of Crete.<sup>iii</sup>

--- Let us Pray,

Gracious god in these precious days of preparation, teach us how to live, to love & to let go that we may know the greater gifts you have in store for the faithful.

We pray in the name of Jesus, our guide. Amen.

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i

This information is from a sermon “**Can You Smell the Perfume?**” by Leonard Sweet. I don't know when or where it was delivered.

ii

For a great comparison of this John 12:1-8 story in the other gospels see the discussion and chart at [http://rockhay.tripod.com/sermons/texts/NT/gospels/john\\_12\\_01-08.htm](http://rockhay.tripod.com/sermons/texts/NT/gospels/john_12_01-08.htm)

iii

This story from a sermon by Ron Skidmore “God's 'Empty' Promise” delivered April 5,1992 at South Congregational Church in Grand Rapids, MI.