

Sermon Text: John 12:1-8

Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I was trying to think of a story that illustrated extravagant giving of Mary of Bethany. I remembered several years ago on an UMVIM trip, I went to the Dutch West Indies, and a little island, 9 square mile volcanic island called St. Eustatius. We stayed there for two weeks, and we worked on the church, and I was able to preach there and serve communion there as well as do some physical labor. We stayed in the modest homes of the people, who lived on that island, homes without even any running water. The only water they had was rainwater off of their lead painted roofs into a cistern. I drank that lead painted roof runoff water for two weeks. I think I was smarter before. It was an interesting experience, humble setting, and the last day before we moved, a friend of mine on the team in one bedroom, and I in another bedroom, we couldn't let our curiosity pass us by. There was one room that had just sort of a curtain tacked up over it. We looked in there, and it was a pantry, a storage closet that the 80-something year-old woman, about the age of my grandmother at the time, had been sleeping in for that two-week period. She had only two bedrooms, and she gave each of us one, and slept on a cot in a closet so that we could be more comfortable while working on her church. She gave her best, and so I know the spirit of Mary of Bethany still lives.

Jesus went to see some old friends the week before Passover, and Lazarus was recently raised from the dead, and so his sisters, Mary and Martha, knew that Jesus was more than a teacher. He was the Son of God. He was the Messiah. As always, Martha did the busy work, and she was serving them a meal. Mary disappeared, perhaps, as always. When she came back, she held this bottle of essential perfume oil worth, by every commentary I can find, somewhere between \$25,000 and \$30,000. That sort of puts in perspective, between \$25,000 and \$30,000. You know what she did with it? Judas was horrified at the waste because he thought the smell of money was in the air; but on the other hand, talk about spontaneous worship!

We have on occasion offered the open mike in the early service for somebody to share if they wanted to share something in the worship service. If someone wanted to share in that service or in this one, if they went to the ATM, and they withdrew all of their money or a year's worth of salary, and started just laying \$20 and \$100 bills up on the altar and the collection plates, some of us would stop them, and say no, no, no, let's worship, but let's not give quite that much. Let's not give with quite that enthusiasm. We'd slow them down.

A few months ago, my uncle, Archie, I mention from time to time, heard a presentation at his church in Spartanburg about the Heifer Project. Many of you have heard about the Heifer Project. He gave \$200 at the time, and then he thought about it, and he prayed about it a little while later, and he felt that God was urging him to give more, and so he added up his expenses. He knew that he was covered. He really didn't need anything. He's in his high 80's. He decided why not give \$2,000 more to the Heifer Project? After

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all, he was not in need, and they were. Archie said to me that in the end it is God's money, isn't it? All we can do is show whose side we're on by how we use it.

Mary showed whose side she was on. She was on God's side. One year's salary and one extravagant act of worship!

As you can imagine, my uncle, Archie, was roundly criticized by some of my family members. It seemed foolish for him to do that. It seemed poor judgment! It might even be evidence of early Alzheimer's. But no, my uncle was doing what he has always done, what seems right and what seems to be in his mind and in his prayers what God would have him do no matter the cost.

I've been struggling lately with how we as a worshiping people at Main Street could be more joyful to God. We look at the Mary example. We look at Judas as another example. There seem to be only two main roles you can play in worship. One is joyful participation. Two is the critic, the critic. I did come up with a third one. That would be passive observer, sort of like an audience member, but that's not playing a role in worship. That is a refusal to play a role in worship.

Mary joyfully worshiped. There is an ancient theme here. The theme is trust in God will sustain me beyond what looks like a wasteful act of worship. Some few courageous heroes of the faith have evidenced this, complete and total trust that somehow God will enable me to live beyond this extravagant act of worship.

You remember Abraham? Abraham who was promised to be a father of a great nation, and then when he and Sarah finally bore the son to make it possible, God said Abraham, I want you to sacrifice your son, Isaac, on Mount Moriah, to kill him and then make of him a burnt offering. Imagine! Unthinkable! Abraham was asked to destroy a human life, to kill and then burn as a sacrifice his beloved son of the promise. It seemed that all was lost, and yet, Abraham appeared willing. It's a hard story. He had complete and total trust that somehow God would enable him to live beyond this extravagant, apparently wasteful act of trust and even worship. You know the better end of the story, the good end, is that a ram was provided and Isaac was spared, and Abraham passed a test that few of us can fathom.

You remember Noah? Noah, by the way, did not take all the animals two by two. Some he took seven by seven. It's in your Bible. Look it up at lunch, and tell me if I'm wrong. Why seven? Because you need extra breeding pairs of the clean animals, and that makes six, and then one more for the sacrifice, which was the very first thing Noah did when he hit dry land. Imagine after culling and caring for the best animals he could find, Noah gave thanks and praise to God by killing one of each from among the clean animals. The apparent waste! To bring them that far, and then kill and burn one out of seven! What was he doing? As another hero of the faith, Noah was showing complete and total trust that somehow God would enable him to live beyond this extravagant act of worship, and it would turn out all right.

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In the primitive language of the Old Testament, I cringe a little bit, it says God was pleased at the smell of the burning, that God delighted in the wasteful, trusting, thankful worship of Noah's best and only possessions going up in smoke. So God does the opposite of the Eden story where Adam and Eve were punished for not trusting. Noah, when he offered his best and trusted God, God accepted it as true faith and promised that he would never destroy the earth again, by water, but there's another sermon beyond that.

In Exodus 29, again we have the idea of what appears to be a complete waste of a perfectly good animal, the best from the herd, it says in verse 18 there, “You shall offer up in smoke the whole ram on the altar. It is a burnt offering to the Lord. It is a soothing aroma, an offering by fire to the Lord.” You hear this. You don't keep it. You don't breed it. You don't sell it and give the money to the poor, and you don't eat it afterwards. You show God your attachment to Him and your detachment to things by burning it up. It puts a whole different spin on giving to the church as an act of worship, doesn't it? A whole different spin. We are not to give in order to make some budget. We are to give because God says to give of our very best, no strings attached. Giving is either a joyful act of worship or it is accompanied by criticism or you're a passive observer and do not participate.

If we are to echo the heroes of the faith, we will do it with complete and total trust that somehow God will enable me to live beyond my extravagant act of worship.

Now, back to Mary and \$30,000 of nard, but first, a word from Proverbs 3 that sort of speaks to this. It says trust God from the bottom of your heart. Don't try to figure out everything on your own. This is from the “Reader's Digest” version, but it's good. Listen for God's voice in everything you do, everywhere you go. He's the one who will keep you on track. Don't assume that you know it all. Run to God. Run from evil. Your body will glow with health. Your very bones will vibrate with life. Honor God with everything you own. Give Him the first and the best. Your barns will burst. Your wine vats will brim over. Now, that sounds just a little bit too much like the radio- and TV-prosperity Gospel preachers that we reject. Hang on for just a minute.

No less than Jesus made very clear elsewhere in Luke that there is a principal in the Gospel of extravagantly trusting God and showing how much you trust God by how you lend money, how you forgive enemies, how you refuse to judge others, and how you do good even to those who do no good to you in return. Jesus said in Luke 6, do to others, as you would have them do to you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you for even sinners love those who love them? If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you for even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you. Even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much again. Then Jesus said, forget trusting people; forget trusting money, live like you really trust God. And verse 35, love your enemies, do good and lend expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the most high for He is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge and you will not be judged. Do not condemn and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven. Give and it will be given to

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you. A good measure pressed down, shaken together, running over will be put into your lap, for the measure you give will be the measure you get back. This is not only in substance; this is in spiritual interaction with God and with others.

I think we've had enough nard. I hope I'm not disturbing the choir too much. I was told this morning it reminded them of college in the 60's, but that is yet another sermon.

Now we're ready to see what Mary did. She gave the very best she had, the very most she had. She gave her hedge against a future famine, her nest egg, her treasure, and her personal invested fortune all tied up in this outrageously expensive perfume. She didn't just open the bottle. She broke it so there was no hope of plugging it back up and stopping. She poured it out on Jesus. She rubbed His feet. What she did next was taboo for a respectable woman. She loosened her hair in a roomful of men. That wasn't done! Rabbis did not allow single women to caress their feet, but she did, and used her very own hair as a towel to wipe His feet. She filled the room, she filled the house with fragrant scent of her act of trust and worship and thanksgiving. No one knew what to say. Judas looked on with horror at the waste and the smell of money in the air. Martha and the others may have looked on with disgust as she used her hair to anoint His feet. What Mary was doing appeared to be scandalous. It was messy, undignified, unseemly, and yet, Mary alone among them knew and understood that Jesus deserved this kind of worship and adoration. What an extravagant act of worship! It smelled up to high heaven! All Jesus said after she did this was that she had anointed Him before instead of after His death.

In the line of Abraham and the line of Noah and the line of ancient Israel, which gave their best and burnt it as a sign of worship and trust, Mary will always be remembered as a hero of the faith. No half measures, no diluting it with water, no little bit mixed with incense, as I have today! She gave it all. She gave all that she had to worship and as a sign of trust in God and Christ. When you think about Jesus Christ, there's nothing skimpy about Jesus and what He's done for us. In Him, it says in the Scripture, that the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and you may believe this and still not understand the full implications from Galatians that God was in Christ making peace by the blood of His cross. The creator come to us, and we are such a fallen humanity that we rejected Him, and we nailed Him to a cross. That's the kind of world we live in, and that's the kind of God Jesus made known.

God is extravagant. God apparently wastes love and forgiveness and grace passing it on people who will never appreciate it. Wasted on a humanity who seems to not know that they need it, not to know that they must have it, not to know how far we have fallen from where we were meant to be as a world, as a people, as a person. Pray for that sort of peace and that sort of joy, to worship God as Mary did. In the midst of strife, the peace to part with money joyfully, thankfully, trusting God more than it, to part with time and service without regret for the peace Mary of Bethany knew and Judas never understood. Let us pray for that sort of joy and that sort of peace. God has given us so much. Let us open up and give ourselves to God without counting the cost. Amen.