

“Wasteful Extravagance and Wonder”  
C Lent Five; John 12:1-8  
April 7, 2019; 10:00 am  
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO  
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## Anointing His Feet

**12** <sup>1-3</sup> Six days before Passover, Jesus entered Bethany where Lazarus, so recently raised from the dead, was living. Lazarus and his sisters invited Jesus to dinner at their home. Martha served. Lazarus was one of those sitting at the table with them. Mary came in with a jar of very expensive aromatic oils, anointed and massaged Jesus’ feet, and then wiped them with her hair. The fragrance of the oils filled the house.

<sup>4-6</sup> Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples, even then getting ready to betray him, said, “Why wasn’t this oil sold and the money given to the poor? It would have easily brought three hundred silver pieces.” He said this not because he cared two cents about the poor but because he was a thief. He was in charge of their common funds, but also embezzled them.

<sup>7-8</sup> Jesus said, “Let her alone. She’s anticipating and honoring the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you. You don’t always have me.”

## I. WHAT A WASTE!

What a waste! What a crazy use of precious resources. What a self-indulgent, over-the-top, improper and downright embarrassing thing to do!

What was Mary thinking?! What was Jesus thinking, allowing her to spill expensive and smelly anointing oil all over him like that?! So unbecoming.

Now! Of all times. Doesn’t he *know* that his every move is being watched? His every word repeated to the authorities? Even by some *within* the ranks? That there are spies among us; disgruntled disciples in the circle and hovering around the edges?

What a waste of time and money—not to mention a *distraction!* There are important matters to be attended to—by the men. And this woman is being frivolous. Not to mention foolhardy. This is *no* time for lavishing love; for showing her devotion—even if Jesus *did* bring Brother Lazarus back from the grave. We already had that party! Weeks ago.

What a waste! When we sit at the feet of the Divine and listen to Christ’s wisdom, leaving the dishes and the chores be. What a waste, when the shepherd leaves all ninety-nine sheep unattended and unprotected and goes to find “just the one!” What a waste of a day when the woman turns the whole house

upside down to find the *one* coin! What a waste, when the fatted calf is sacrificed for a lavish party for *one* wayward and squandering son!

## **II. MARY GETS WHAT OTHERS DO NOT**

Ever wonder what Mary was thinking? Or maybe she was “out of her head.” Indeed! She was operating out of the heart. And her heart may well have roared that this was *not* the time nor the place for “social propriety.” Not the moment to let pass, counting the cost.

Customs of the day did call for the host, in the homes of the elite, to have someone wash the feet of the guests. But that “someone” was most always one of the slaves. Sandals and dusty roads and long walks made for pretty dirty, tired, and sore feet at a dinner party. So, with cleanliness and hospitality being next to godliness, foot-washing would almost assuredly be offered.

But, Mary? Mary was a sister of the host, probably a wealthy woman, and *not* a slave, and what was she *doing*?! For she was a woman, one of the hosts, *not* a servant or hired help, not married, and touching a man not in her immediate family. Letting him see her hair, to boot! A proper woman would *never* allow anyone other than her immediate family to see her hair!

Mary was a rebel straight out of the gate! Wasting time with Jesus in the living room while Martha was slaving away over a hot stove in the kitchen was already bad enough, but then....

Rule Number Four for this common practice of foot-washing being done in this oh, so *not* common way by the wrong person, was this: Cleaning of the feet was *not* done with perfume—*especially* with the amount described here. This fragrant oil would cost a year’s wages for a peasant laborer!

So, Mary has just broken *all* the rules in one act of extravagant emotion and lavish love.

## **III. WHO SHE IS AND WHO JESUS IS**

And perhaps that is because she knows *who* she *is* and *who* Jesus *is*. Mary’s Identity Test just got passed today with flyer colors. A+++ . Mary of Bethany is not just a “lazy, doesn’t-lift-a-hand” younger sister that we’ve come to think of through the ages—the counter-balance to the dutiful, industrious, responsible, always-serving, Martha.

But she is a no-holds-barred beloved and loving disciple. A follower to the very end.

Mary has no question who Jesus is and what’s about to happen to him. As part of the elite of Bethany – just a stone’s throw from Jerusalem, she had connections.

And she would be very aware of the plans that were brewing and stewing about Jesus. She would know not only that a plot was afoot to bring Jesus to an untimely end, but also the means by which it would be done.

Crucifixion was the very public execution of choice by the Romans. They didn't just "dispose of the rabble-rousers *themselves*," but hung them out there for all to see in order to *kill* the movement. To put a decisive end to anyone's wild ideas of carrying on belief in what the bad guy stood for, or any carrying on at all!

And this brings us to Rule Number Five in anointing:

Anointing was, indeed, the proper rite for honoring the body of the deceased, no matter how they came to their demise. And it's noteworthy that she is anointing his *feet*, as one would a corpse, and not his head, which was for a king. She knew.

But Crucifixion did *not* allow for this to happen. Out there on that horrific hillside. This was another trick up the sleeves of the Romans—they *enjoyed* preventing those comforting and respectful customs. The bodies were usually left on the crosses for *days*, so the scavenging birds and animals could devour the flesh and add to the pain and disgrace of the loved ones.

Jesus knows this and Mary knows this. "Leave her alone," he scolds the critics. "She's anticipating and honoring the day of my burial." Mary, the rebel, the one who goes *against* social customs, is now doing the *most right and proper*; honorable and loving thing of all! In her rebellion is justice. In her resistance to her "expected role" the sacred face and holy love of God is found in the flesh – hers and Jesus'.

Mary pours wasteful extravagance on Jesus, in anticipation of Jesus lavishing upon humanity the ultimate gift – laying down his life – the greatest offering of love.

#### **IV. EXTRAVAGANCE OF GOD**

And in that moment, Mary is a prophet. For prophets point us to a message of God, or personify and exemplify an attribute of the Divine – to give us a glimpse.

Barbara Brown Taylor and Kate Matthews remind us that "Mary is prophetically witnessing to the extravagance, the lavishness of *God's* love and mercy, something Mary had experienced in Jesus himself, just as we can even today.

Just as Jesus began his ministry with an extravagance of excellent wine at a wedding feast, so his ministry comes to a close here in an extravagance of expensive ointment, a passionate display of love and caring that even the woman who offers it does not fully understand. There's nothing stingy, nothing miserly, about God's love."

Bookends of extravagance. The whole gospel – Jesus' ministry, from start to finish. "I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly!" Wine overflowing from what was once mere water. Lavish love poured out in acts of improper indulgence – so against the rules, but oh, so right in the end.

## **V. WASTE TIME WITH GOD THIS WEEK**

What a waste! When extravagance borders on excess, we wonder how to respond.

We need to understand the difference between extravagance and excess if we are to find our way. If we are to begin to understand the Sacred. Judas was focused on the “excess” – as well we should be as we are wise and faithful followers and stewards. Yet, he was not sincere. He didn’t give a rat’s \_\_\_\_\_ for the poor, and everybody knew it. Especially the gospel writers.

But when we *are* sincere and pure of heart, we can find the balance of excess and extravagance, and let the Holy One lavish love upon us and do the same in return.

*Bernard Williams, 20th century*

"An extravagance is something that your spirit thinks is a necessity."

As we turn the bend into Holy Week and complete our Lenten Journey, take some time to reflect back on the Identity Test of our journey this season. Who are you and who are you called to be?

And this week, be wasteful about it! Your homework is to practice a little extravagance – on yourself! Waste some time with God this week. The time is now! Spring and Nature’s abundant blessings and beauty are busting out all over! Long awaited, indeed.

If you ever doubt the extravagant love of your Creator, just look at creation! Consider the lilies, the sparrow,

the grains of sand, the clouds, the drops of moisture, the rocks and trees, stars and bees. Revel in the anointing that God gives us every day in the warmth and light of the sun; in the kiss of the breeze; the fragrance of the flowers and trees.

## **VI. WASTEFUL EXTRAVAGANCE AND WONDER**

And speaking of wasteful extravagance, we go now to the Table. This place of Gathering like no other. Where every soul is welcomed—no questions asked of worthiness. Where love is lavished in abundance – where the cup never runs dry, the bread never stops breaking and being given out share.

Let us gather at the wasteful, wonderful, extravagant and excessive, Welcoming Table of our Lord. For here, everything and *everyone* belong – love and acceptance in abundance. What a wonderful waste! Amen.