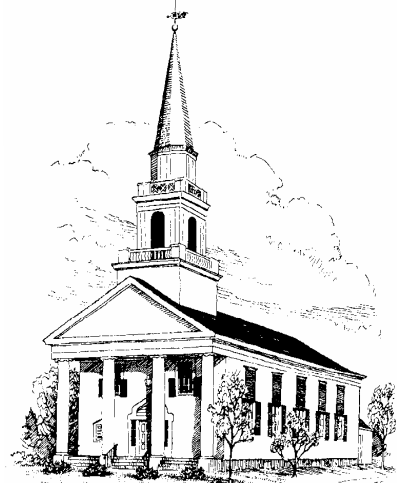


Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from March 25, 2007
Rev. Barbara J. Libby
“God’s Extravagant Love”

Scriptures:
Psalm 126
John 12:1-8



Mary offered Jesus a gift out of her love and her devotion. And people in the room that night probably didn’t quite understand it. Perhaps we don’t really understand it either! Mary used her long and unbound hair in a shocking and intimate way to offer something to a man who had returned her brother to the land of the living from the land of the dead.

Mary was acting out of her newly discovered understanding of who Jesus really was. Perhaps she had come to understand who he was in the time she had spent with him. Maybe she had suspected over time who he really was. Maybe after so many miracles and so many healing stories, she had started to believe who he really was. Maybe Mary had guessed at who Jesus really was before.

Then Jesus raised her brother Lazarus from the tomb, a tomb where she and Martha had carefully prepared and laid his perfumed and wrapped dead body for burial. It was after that remarkable raising from the dead that Mary probably came to understand who Jesus really was. Who else could do such things? Who else but someone filled with the power of God’s love could bring back a human being from death to life again?

Mary knew that Jesus’ life was now in serious jeopardy. Mary and all the disciples knew that the authorities were out looking for Jesus to arrest him and take him out of the center of attention. She knew, by the public raising from the dead of her brother and with the evidence—with Lazarus himself walking around after having been dead and in the tomb for days—and they all knew that there were powerful forces at work in Jerusalem to try to get rid of Jesus. Jesus had become a true threat to the authorities.

That night, after everyone had gathered at their home in Bethany, Mary and Martha had served a special meal to their friend, Jesus. The disciples were there with him eating at the table. They all ate together and shared the stories of the day, anticipating the Passover celebration to come. Then Mary left the table and went to her room to retrieve a pottery container of expensive perfumed ointment.

Mary had probably already used some of this same strongly perfumed ointment to prepare her brother, Lazarus, for his burial just days before. That was the tradition of the day—to cover the body with perfumed ointment before it was wrapped and placed into a cave tomb.

Mary had been thinking about all that might come to pass for Jesus in the days ahead. Jesus had been warning them, after all, that he would soon die. Perhaps the smell of that perfumed ointment still hung in the air around Lazarus as he sat at the table, in spite of several baths. So Mary got up from the

table and went and got the container of perfumed nard. She brought it to Jesus and anointed each of his feet, carefully rubbing the ointment into the dry and cracked feet of the man she knew to be God in human form.

Next she unwrapped her long hair and carefully wiped those same feet with her hair. What an astonishing thing! How strange to see a woman do such a thing in front of others! The taking down of one's hair in a room full of men was too intimate a thing to do for a respectable woman. The placing of ointment on the feet of another, not one's husband, simply was not done—on the head maybe, but not the feet. A single woman caressing the feet of a rabbi—also simply not done. And then wiping the salve off again with her hair—a totally inexplicable thing.

We are left to wonder along with all those in the room that night. We can only wonder. Did Mary imagine that the smell of the perfumed ointment that she rubbed onto Jesus' feet would linger on him in the coming days? Did she have any way of knowing that the smell would be with him as he walked with the crowds into Jerusalem for the Passover in just a few more days? Did Mary believe that the adoring crowds waving palm branches and spreading their cloaks on the ground for the donkey on which he would ride into Jerusalem would notice the strong smell of perfumed ointment as he rode by?

Did Mary imagine that the soothing ointment's smell would follow after Jesus as he spent his last days with his disciples and gathered for a final Passover meal in the Upper Room? Did Mary consider that the smell of the ointment would waft among the disciples as they knelt and prayed with Jesus in the Garden as he would be arrested? Did Mary understand that she might be anointing his body for the long time of trial and abuse that he would receive at the hands of the authorities? Could she possibly imagine his long arduous walk through the city streets dragging a wooden cross? Did Mary possibly understand that she was anointing Jesus' body for his dying on a cross and his burial in another stone tomb?

What did Mary know? We really don't know. We can only imagine what Mary believed and what she thought she was doing that night in her own home, with her brother and sister there and the other disciples.

John's Gospel does tell us that Jesus seemed to know something. Jesus seemed to understand that at least part of this anointing ointment had been bought for and kept at the house in Bethany in anticipation of his burial. Jesus says as much as he defends her actions to Judas and says, "She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." Jesus seems to know that Mary anoints him as another verification of his own impending death. He doesn't want Mary harassed for her actions. He doesn't want Mary criticized for her extraordinary gift.

We know from John's Gospel that Jesus had already clearly galvanized the opposition of the religious authorities. Jesus had already been stoned by folks in Jerusalem in the preceding weeks; his life had already been threatened by the authorities. Even coming back to his friends home in Bethany, just outside of Jerusalem in the days preceding the Passover, was placing Jesus' life in jeopardy. He had probably come to the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus that night in secret.

Jesus was not looking to be arrested that night. John's Gospel does make it clear, though, that there is already a clear plot planned against Jesus' life. Jesus knows that his life is in danger with every passing hour. Jesus' words support the idea that everyone at the table that night understood that Jesus' life was in jeopardy and the end of his life neared with every step closer to Jerusalem.

It is difficult to believe that anyone at the dinner table that night did not, in some sense, "get"

what Mary was doing that night as the fragrance of the perfumed nard filled the house. Mary was offering Jesus an amazing and extravagant gift that evening at her home in Bethany. Mary offered him a gift of touch, an intimate gift of caring, a gift of recognition and presence that Jesus would be hard pressed to find anywhere else in the coming days. Mary offered Jesus both a remarkably extravagant gift of healing balm and a powerful and intimate moment of comfort for a human body which would only receive abuse in the coming days.

One poet writes of this scene in this way: (*Counting the Cost* - Ann Weems)

The end begins with a woman who poured perfume upon his feet,
She poured it lavishly, without counting the cost ...
The disciples were angry;
the perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor.
Where have I heard that tune before?
Oh, what trouble we have with gifts and giving!
You want to tell me how much and when and to whom
And I want to tell you my way of giving is better than yours ...
What Jesus told the disciples and us is:
An extravagance of the heart is a fine and beautiful thing ...
Why is it that this one is so hard for us?

There is something about this brief story that may bother us. There is Judas Iscariot's whining complaint that this expensive perfume could have been sold and the moneys used to give to the poor. Of course, he was right. Yet, how ironic, that it is Judas who makes this complaint—the very man who will bring the authorities to Jesus for his arrest. Judas knows that the ointment that Mary has spread on Jesus' feet is worth 300 denari and could easily have kept a laborer and his family alive for a year on that much money!

There is an extravagance about Mary's gift, isn't there? Yet Jesus is quick to respond that what Mary has offered him goes beyond the reality, beyond the simple "facts" of the situation. "Extravagance goes against the grain of many good Christians," it is said. (B. D. Brewer) We good New Englanders resonate with that discomfort about extravagance, don't we?

As we move into these final weeks of Lent we continue our preparations for the big events to come. We continue to prepare for the big events of the coming Holy week beginning next week with a triumphant parade into Jerusalem. Then we are plunged into the growing concerns of the authorities and a last Passover supper with the disciples—a betrayal and an arrest, a mock trial and repeated brutality, a final terrible death on a cross and a burial in a tomb.

We know the drill. And we wait for the empty tomb on Easter morning. We prepare not only for death in the events to come but also for life beyond death.

Mary helps Jesus prepare for his coming death. She extravagantly shares this perfumed ointment without holding back anything. Mary's extravagance is also balanced by her understanding that she helps prepare Jesus for his death and burial while also helping him prepare for a new life, an eternal life with the God who is his "Abba", his loving parent.

On Easter morning, when Jesus' tomb is discovered empty, Mary already understood that the real extravagance comes from a God whose love is poured out without limitation. An extravagant God who offers us more than we can ever imagine, an extravagant God whose love knows no bounds and who continues to do great things for us.

Let us go out rejoicing this day, knowing that we serve a God of extravagant love!

Amen.