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Extravagant Love

I did not watch the Oscars. But I can’t help hearing about the scandalous confrontation between actor Will Smith and comedian Chris Rock. It seems “everyone” is talking about it….on Facebook and social media, on talk shows, and even in the nightly news. Not just once, but all week long. Everyone seems to have their own take on what happened and why, on what should have happened and didn’t, on what the appropriate response is. It’s the “talk” of the town!

In our text today, the exchange between Mary and Jesus was also scandalous. It simply was not done for a respectable woman to unbind her hair in mixed company. And then to touch a man’s feet and wipe them with her own hair! Not to mention the extravagant use of expensive nard to anoint Jesus’ feet! It simply wasn’t done and I suspect it, too, was the talk of the town…at least until the next scandal or big event came along…and the week that followed, the week we know as Holy week, was certainly full of noteworthy events. But this event was remembered, for Jesus also did not respond the way a respected rabbi was expected to react.

Of those present, other than Jesus, our text only tells us how Judas responded, with critique of the wasteful use of the perfume. Nard comes from the spikenard plant which grows in the Himalayas of Nepal, China, and India. Judas suggested the nard could have been sold for three hundred denarii, a year’s worth of wages, and used to help the poor. We aren’t told how others at table reacted. Perhaps they were too shocked to say anything, or maybe by this time they were used to the surprising ways that Jesus crossed social boundaries and norms. Whatever they expected of Jesus, Mary’s actions must have scandalized them.

To put this story into context, Jesus has had previous encounters with Mary, her sister Martha and brother Lazarus. They are Jesus’ friends. He has visited their home before. The first visit that is recorded is found in Luke 10:38-42. At that visit Martha is busy serving but Mary sits at Jesus’ feet. Her posture is that of a disciple sitting at the feet of the teacher, the rabbi. It was a role normally reserved for men. But Jesus not only accepts Mary in this role; he tells Martha that this will not be taken from Mary.

A more recent visit is recorded in John chapter 11. Lazarus has been ill. They have sent for Jesus but he tarries, only arriving four days after Lazarus’ death. When he arrives he is greeted by Martha. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him. “ Jesus responds, “Your brother will rise again.” Their conversation concludes with these words: Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” Martha responds with a confession of faith, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

Martha returns and calls Mary. Mary hurries to Jesus followed by the Jews who were mourning with her. Mary kneels at Jesus’ feet and also says to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Mary and those with her are weeping. Jesus weeps with her. The group goes to the tomb and Jesus calls for Lazarus to come out. Lazarus, who was dead, comes out alive, wrapped in the cloth bindings of death. Many of those who were with Mary believe, but some go to the Pharisees and report to them what has happened. The council meets, concerned that so many are now following Jesus. They fear an uprising that will bring the Roman army down upon them, destroying both the temple and the nation. The high priest Caiaphas declares, “It is better for one man to die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.” From that time on the council looks for a way to put Jesus to death. Jesus can no longer move openly among the people, so Jesus and his disciples depart to a small village called Ephraim near the wilderness. People wonder if he will return for the Passover celebration. They know that the council wants to arrest him.

That is the background for today’s text. Jesus and his disciples have returned to the area near Jerusalem. The Passover is near, and they will celebrate it in Jerusalem. They have come to Bethany, to the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. They are enjoying a meal together. Martha is serving. Lazarus is at the table with Jesus and his disciples. Tomorrow Jesus and the twelve will go to Jerusalem. There are rising expectations. Perhaps this is the time that Jesus will claim his role as Messiah. Our reading of the Gospel of John tells us that the following day is the day we celebrate as Palm Sunday, when the people rejoice, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord, the king of Israel!” The people’s expectations of Messiah are not the same as Jesus’ expectations.

Jesus has been telling the disciples that a cross awaits him. Mary’s use of the nard to anoint Jesus’ feet is a prophetic act. Anointing someone with oil was a way of setting them apart for a specific purpose. In the Bible we find prophets, priests and kings anointed to serve in their given roles. The dead were also anointed with spices for burial in order to alleviate the smell of decay as the body decomposed.

We don’t know what Mary was thinking as she anointed Jesus’ feet with the nard. The text doesn’t tell us. It does tell us what Jesus said in response to Judas’ critique: “Leave her alone! She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

Mary, too, was a disciple who had sat at Jesus’ feet. Perhaps she understood what the twelve did not, that Jesus was indeed going to meet his death in Jerusalem, and the time was getting very near. Wes Howard-Brooke teaches theology and religious studies at Seattle University. He says, “Through her deed Mary reveals a clear understanding of what is about to unfold, an understanding totally lost on those at table with Jesus later the same week. She exhibits the attitude of a disciple who has learned the lesson of Lazarus: the prospect of death is not to be avoided or denied but to be prepared for.”

Mary’s action provides us with an example of extravagant love. This is one of the few times in the Gospel accounts where someone comes to Jesus, not to ask for help, for healing or teaching or calming a storm or feeding a multitude, but to give something precious to Jesus. Mary takes the most precious, costly thing she has, and pours it all on Jesus’ feet. It is an extravagant act, perhaps it seems wasteful, but it reflects an outpouring of love that doesn’t count the cost, that isn’t afraid of what people might think or say, a love that is willing to give everything.

Willard Swartley writes that “Love (both noun and verb) appear fifty-seven times in the Gospel. It is the identity mark of Jesus’ disciples (John 13:14-35 and 14:23-24). Love one another is John’s default ethical command. Love is the litmus test for discipleship.” Swartley continues, “Love binds together the Son and Father in their mutual self-donation to the world (15:9-10, 12-13) and in their relationship to each other….”

Mary’s gift to Jesus marks the beginning of Jesus’ passion and is not the only gift of extravagant love in the Gospel. Surely Jesus’ willingness to go to the cross on our behalf, to end the cycle of violence with forgiveness, is also an extravagant outpouring of love. In John 15 verses 12 and following Jesus says, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends…I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

The Isaiah passage that we read this morning tells us that God is about to do something new. Rivers will run in the wilderness and in the barren desert so that God’s people will be able to drink and offer praise. Out of scarcity God gives abundance and life. Isaiah asks “do you not perceive it?” Out of death comes life.

In the Gospel Jesus calls us to a new way of abundant living, a way of life that bears fruit as it abides in Jesus, just as Jesus abides in the Father, in God. That way of living calls us to extravagant love…love for one another, love for our neighbor, and yes, love for our enemies, love for those we disagree with, love for those we don’t understand, love for those who are different from us.

We cannot physically pour fragrant perfume on Jesus’ feet, as Mary did, but we can live abundantly and love extravagantly as Mary did. Such love is not merely emotion. We love extravagantly when we exhibit generosity and hospitality to others, to refugees, to strangers, to people on the margins, to the homeless and the lonely. We love extravagantly when we share what we have and care for those in need. We love extravagantly when we refuse to take revenge but offer forgiveness when we are wronged. We love extravagantly when we actively become peacemakers, and when we advocate for those experiencing injustice. We love extravagantly when we follow Jesus to whatever cross awaits us on his behalf, when we offer our all as Mary did.

“Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee. Take my moments and my days, let them flow in ceaseless praise. Take my hands and let them move at the impulse of thy love. Take my feet and let them be swift and beautiful for thee. Take my intellect and use every power as thou shalt choose. Take my lips and let them be filled with messages from thee. Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold. Take my will and make it thine, it shall be no longer mine. Take my love; my Lord, I pour at thy feet its treasure store. Take myself and I will be ever, only, all for thee.

May we love extravagantly, as Mary did, as Jesus did, out of God’s abundant love and boundless grace.