

Sermon “An Outpouring of Love”
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SCRIPTURE John 12: 1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ²There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” ⁶(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) ⁷Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.” ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.’

SERMON An Outpouring of Love

Reverend William Sloane Coffin, a Presbyterian minister, was a chaplain at Yale and senior minister of Riverside Church in NYC. He spoke about God becoming human in an advent sermon – yes, I said Advent, not Lent. But I believe his words apply to this morning's reading. Coffin believed that God becoming human “says as much about what we are to become as it does about what God has become. Christ becomes like us so we may become like him. He comes to convert us, but not from life to something more than life, rather from something less than life to the possibility of full life itself.” He reminds us that Jesus said, “I came that you might have life and have it more abundantly.” Or translated in different words, “The Glory of God is the human being fully alive.”

Being fully alive. Isn't that what love is about – feeling fully alive. Think of it, love enables us to feel fully alive. Whether we are talking about the love we have for a spouse or partner or for a child or grandchild or a dear friend, when we love we feel more alive. When we love another deeply, we feel that person's joy and that person's sorrow. We enter into the fullness of life of another, with all its ups and downs. When we are fully alive, we experience life in all its emotions.

Coffin spoke of sin as not being fully alive. He asked if we live with passion or if our lives consist of simply waking up and existing day after day. As an example, he talked about the movie, “Educating Rita.” In that movie, Rita wrote an essay for an entrance exam. It was apparently “superb – personal, original, and honest” but not the stuff that one would submit for an entrance exam. So Rita crumbled it up and threw it away. She asked what she needed to do to

make her essay fit the exam requirement. Coffin believed Rita was willing to become less of herself to fit the mold. He believed that we often do that in our society – to fit in, to be successful.

Coffin went on to say, “But God is always trying to make humanity more human. That’s what the Incarnation is all about. Christ becomes like us, not that we should become less, but more ourselves.” He explained that even if we are successful or do virtuous things, without love they don’t matter. He said, “Love alone is the expression of our aliveness. And the Incarnation offers us all the gift of this life of love. But we have to take it, and we have to apply it to our lives in all possible ways.”

Well, our scripture passage this morning certainly tells a story of living out love, abundant and extravagant love.

Jesus was dining with friends in the home of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. At that dinner, there were friends that he loved, friends that loved him, and others. And at that dinner, the unimaginable happened. Mary poured out her love for Jesus in a way that no one could ever have anticipated. She poured a pound, a pound of expensive perfume on Jesus’ feet. It would have been unheard of.

Take a moment and imagine knocking over a full bottle of expensive perfume or cologne, one worth a whole year’s wages. Can you imagine what that room would smell like? Can you imagine if you spilled it on yourself? How long you would have that smell with you? Can you imagine the smell of perfume lingering during that meal and on Jesus?

This interaction between Mary and Jesus would have been an assault on the senses and to the sensibilities. To add to that unexpected moment, after pouring all that perfume on Jesus’ feet, Mary then wiped Jesus’ feet with her hair. It was a sensual act, an act that would not have been proper for a Jewish woman to do in public, especially to a man who was not her husband. Just letting her hair down in public, at a dinner like that, would have been seen as inappropriate.

Mary and Martha would have been expected to serve at the dinner. Martha was doing the traditional form of service, serving the meal. But Mary, anointing Jesus with perfume, and wiping the perfume with her hair... she knew what she was doing. Mary demonstrated her deep gratitude and love for Jesus. She demonstrated her awareness of who Jesus was and maybe even what was in store for him. Mary was the devoted disciple, pouring out her feelings in the pouring of perfume.

Now the timing of this act can perhaps help us to understand Mary’s actions. Jesus had recently raised Lazarus from the dead. For 4 days, Lazarus had been in the tomb. Mary was mourning the death of her brother. For four days she had believed she would never see him again. He

and she and Martha were adult siblings who shared a home. They lived together. They were close. And they were all friends of this radical Jewish preacher, prophet, and Messiah and Lord.

Yes. Mary, and her sister Martha, believed that Jesus was the Messiah, and their Lord. They believed Jesus could have prevented their brother's death. Martha had told Jesus "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." She even called him Lord and said "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah." Mary also believed in him and called him Lord. When Lazarus was in the tomb, Mary told Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died."

And at that tomb, Jesus wept. There was a special bond between these friends. These friends were more than just followers of Jesus. Jesus and these women and their brother loved each other deeply.

These two sisters truly understood who Jesus was. They were truly disciples. At that dinner, they both served him. Martha, as was the tradition, prepared the meal. Mary, throwing convention to the wind, poured the perfume on Jesus' feet and wiped it with her hair. With her actions Mary thanked Jesus for raising her brother. And she extravagantly honored him, as her Lord and Messiah.

Mary had also anointed his body for burial. Jesus had been preparing his disciples for his approaching death. Mary had been listening. Maybe she really understood. Maybe it was women's intuition. But, some where inside of her she knew something was about to happen. So she needed to do something for her Lord. Mary's discipleship was truly generous and extravagant. Her actions demonstrated her love for her Lord.

And Jesus appreciated her extravagant act of love. As he sat there, the fragrance of that perfume drifted up from his feet. It would also linger on him. Perhaps it would have lingered as he went home that evening, as he as he would ride that colt into Jerusalem, as his feet would bring him closer to his death. Perhaps that lingering fragrance would remind him of that act of extravagant love as he approached his betrayal and death.

But not everyone understood or agreed with Mary's extravagant display. Not everyone saw her extravagance as a good thing.

Now, I don't know what my reaction would have been if I had been a guest at that dinner. Once I got over the shock of the moment, Mary's actions would have made me stop and think about whether I would have had her courage. I don't know if I would have the courage to show Jesus that level of appreciation and love.

How about you? Can you imagine what your reaction to Mary's extravagant act of devotion might have been?

Now, Judas, was appalled. He objected. He spoke as though he was only thinking about the poor, of how the money could benefit those in need. His disdain may have been real. But John tells us that Judas was not really interested in the poor. He was a crook that he had been stealing money from the disciples' purse.

Jesus emphatically defended Mary's action. Not only did he tell Judas to leave her alone, but he told Judas that she had bought the perfume for his burial. Jesus knew what was coming for him. And he told Judas that Mary's action was appropriate because he would be leaving them. They would not always have him. They would always have the poor.

Jesus' words, "always have the poor," sound crass, almost hypocritical to his ministry. They sound like Jesus does not care. In fact, those words of Jesus have been used by people to propose that we do not need to help the poor because we will always have them with us.

But that's not what Jesus was saying. Jesus was actually turning to his Jewish roots, the tenants of his faith. In Deuteronomy 15: 7-11 it says

"7 If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards your needy neighbor. ⁸You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. ⁹Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, 'The seventh year, the year of remission, is near', and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt. ¹⁰Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. ¹¹Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.' "

Do not be tight-fisted, open your hand willingly to anyone in need. Give liberally and ungrudgingly – to your poor and needy neighbor. Give generously and God will bless you. Yes, Jesus has called upon his faith, reminding Judas of the need to give to the poor. Jesus knows that giving to the poor is part of a life of faith.

Mary acted extravagantly and generously, displaying her love and devotion to Jesus.

Throughout our Lenten journey, we have heard the stories of extravagance – of a gardener who would provide extra TLC to a barren fig tree, a shepherd who would seek one lost sheep, and a father who offered extravagant forgiveness and love. Extravagance, generosity, forgiveness – they can't be legislated. They are stories of our faith. They come from the heart. They come from love.

We are disciples of an extravagant God, who offers us abundant love and has done great things for us – even taking on our humanity. All that we have is from our generous God.

And today, we hear the story of Mary, who extravagantly demonstrated her love and devotion, and Martha who demonstrated steadfast service. We look to Mary, and to Martha, as disciples of Jesus. They each served their Lord in their own way. They lived their discipleship from a place of love. They remind us that the starting point of serving our God, our loved ones, our neighbors is love.

As William Sloane Coffin said, “Love alone is the expression of our aliveness.” As we reflect on our lives this Lent, may we see that when we live our lives to the fullest, we are living lives of love. For when we live in love and live out love, life will be good enough.