



Sermons from St. Marks United Church of Christ New Albany, Indiana



Is It O.K. to be Extravagant?

Text: John 12:1-8

Rev. Lori Lewis

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It appears that Jesus was very close with Mary, Martha and Lazarus and that he used their house as a type of headquarters during his last visit to Jerusalem for the celebration of the Passover. It was a good location too. Bethany was a village just over the ridge of the Mount of Olives. The Mount of Olives was a mountain ridge just east of Jerusalem. The distance to Bethany from the gate to the temple would have been less than two miles and less than that to the Garden of Gethsemane which was at the foot of the Mount of Olives. There are three references in the gospels to Jesus being with Mary and Martha. First, Martha and Mary were visited by Jesus (Luke 10:38-42) Martha and Mary offered hospitality to Jesus. Mary sat and listened to him as he talked. Martha was the one who objected to being left with all the work. Jesus told Martha not to worry about small things, but to concentrate on what was important in life. That is the story that women especially like to hear around the time of holiday gatherings because it helps chill us out a bit about having all the work done perfectly. The Martha=s make it hard though B we have Martha in the Bible and Martha Stewart both showing examples of the hostess with the mostess. The second story of Mary and Martha is when they ask for Jesus= help (John 11:1-44) Lazarus was ill. Martha and Mary sent for Jesus. He delayed coming and in the meantime, Lazarus died. When Jesus arrived, both Martha and Mary reproached him for not coming sooner. Martha made an extraordinary statement of her faith in Jesus. He went to the tomb, prayed, and called to Lazarus. Lazarus came out, alive, from the tomb.

Then finally, the story of our scripture reading today, Jesus is once again having supper with his friends and we come to the story of 3 Mary of Bethany anointing Jesus (John 12:1-8) Martha, Mary and Lazarus gave a dinner for Jesus. During the dinner, Mary anointed Jesus with expensive perfume. Judas objected to her extravagance. Jesus defended her action.

How ironic is that B Judas is the one who thinks he can decide what is O.K. behavior for Mary B he chastises her for being too extravagant, using expensive oil so carelessly, using way too much on Jesus B and he=s the one who will very shortly decide that the extravagant life that money promises is worth turning Jesus over to his death.

I don=t know how much the perfume that Mary used would be in today=s dollars, but it=s not too hard for us to find stories of extravagance B look to all the articles of the rich and famous that are daily on the internet and in the news. It=s easy for us to call much of that extravagant. What is extravagant truly is different for everyone B every single one of us in this sanctuary today is

living an extravagant lifestyle compared to the majority of people around the world. Most of us are pretty good too about noticing other people's extravagances. Can you believe that they just bought such and such, or that she would spend that much on that purse, or that he would drive a car that cost that much or that they would take all of those fancy vacations, or that they would get such and such for a 12 year old? We all do it. We judge other people's extravagances wondering if they really have the money or if they are going into further debt. The truth is that Jesus would probably find every one of us too extravagant in our expenditures of money, after all, he said that disciples of him should give all of their money away. But at the risk of letting all of us off the hook, I want to say that I don't think the point of this scripture passage is to get us to spend more wisely. There are plenty of scriptures that do, but not this one. Jesus was supporting Mary's extravagance. Remember, he disagreed with Judas, but the extravagance that he was commending was not because he was impressed with her expensive perfumed oil, it was because he was impressed with the extravagance that she was willing to go to to express her love. She was extravagant in her love!

Why did she use all that expensive oil on Jesus. Some say it was an act of gratitude in which she was thanking Jesus for raising her brother Lazarus from the dead. Some say it was an act of consecration in which she was baptizing Jesus to encourage Him to go into the Holy City and do what had to be done. Others say it was a foreshadowing, an act of preparation, in which she was anointing His body for the death which was to come in Jerusalem a few days later. All would agree that it was an act of love and kindness. But Judas said it was a waster. If you lived strictly by the Judas mind-set, you would have no steeple of churches, no flowers on the altar, no art on the wall, no robes for the choir, no beautiful organ, no beautiful weddings.

What if as Christians we allowed this passage to let us reclaim the word extravagance to be a good word, a positive attribute, because that's the way Jesus used it in talking about Mary. If we are extravagant in our love, extravagant in our generosity, extravagant in our gratitude and extravagant in our graciousness. What a beautiful thing it would be.

The United Church of Christ's, God is Still Speaking campaign makes good use of the word extravagant by encouraging churches to offer an extravagant welcome to others.

When we say "No matter who you are or where you are in life's journey you are welcome here" it is meant to be an extravagant welcome. Extravagant because we mean it. All are welcome, and it is extravagant because it is not like that in all churches.

In just the last couple of weeks, I've been reminded of the extravagant inclusion of all that we are a part of in the United Church of Christ. First, Rev. Kristy May, chaplain of the Emmaus Homes was here a few weeks ago reminding us that mentally challenged adults have a place where they are loved and cared for. And they are taken care of in the name of Christ's church 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, every day of the year. They are included in life in an extravagant way. And Friday, I went with some of our senior adult group to visit Brooklawn home for boys in Louisville, also owned by our United Church of Christ. At Brooklawn, boys who have been abused, neglected and made to feel they have no worth, are now being extravagantly included in life, they are loved, taught, cared for and cared about in ways that are extravagant compared to anything they could have imagined. We are called as a church to sometimes be extravagant. Going wild with welcoming everyone, including everyone, telling of God's love to everyone. Last Saturday, about 20 of us from St. Marks took the Salvation Army's disaster relief training and

you will be hearing more about that in the months ahead. The response the Salvation Army gives to disaster situations is an extravagant response to people whose lives are literally turning upside down.

You know the expression, "There's no free lunch" well there is at St. Marks and many other churches. When churches and organizations give meals and clothes away for free it is an extravagant act of generosity. When we leave our free time on the weekend to come to worship with each other, to serve on the council and other committees, to teach in our Sunday school and to do all of the things that volunteers do around this place, it is an extravagant act of gratitude to God.

When churches and communities come together through groups like Habitat for Humanity and build house in just a few days with little money, it is an act of extravagant generosity.

Let's decide that in some things, it's not only o.k. to be extravagant, but is beautiful to be extravagant when we are being extravagant in our generosity, in our gratitude to God and others, and in our welcome and inclusion of others.

When we live extravagantly in those ways, we are all rich.

It doesn't take much to distract us from the meaning of life. We were created to know, love and serve God. The first commandment is "I am the Lord your God. You shall not have any other gods before me".

Many people say that in their early lives they placed a lot of emphasis on building up their career but later in life they become aware of the value and importance of friendship with God. It seems that the journey to really live the first commandment to love God above all, takes many people most of their lives. There is great satisfaction for a time in building up our own kingdom and thinking about being extravagant in our spending and acquiring of things. Until the day comes when that doesn't satisfy us any more and then we realize that what satisfies us is building up God's kingdom.

The Biblical Mary had the right idea and Jesus told everyone that she did she was going above and beyond the call of duty, she was showing Jesus her love in the most extravagant way she knew how.

For us today, we don't have the chance to anoint Jesus with expensive oil, but every time we are extravagant in the way we care for his sheep, it is as if we are sitting on the floor at Jesus' feet and giving him the best we have to offer our love and devotion.