

SERMON  
5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent  
March 21, 2010

Isaiah 43:16-21  
Psalm 126  
Philippians 3:4b-14  
John 12:1-8

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

It was a bright, sunshiny day and Margie was very happy. It was her birthday. She was seven years old. That afternoon, Margie's mother gave her a party. All of her friends were there. They played games, and ate lots of cake and ice cream. Margie blew out all of the candles on her cake in one blow.

Her friends cheered and urged her to open her presents. She got a bracelet, a new blouse, a baby doll, and a book of adventure stories. But her favorite gift was a friendship ring from her best friend, Helen. It was silver and had a red heart in its center. Margie told Helen that it was the best present she had ever received, and she promised that she would wear it everywhere.

The next day a beautiful woman came to Margie's school to talk to the students about hungry children. The beautiful woman was a famous movie actress who had given a year of her life to traveling as a goodwill ambassador for UNICEF. She told them about all of the hungry children she had visited in refugee camps around the world.

In Cambodia she had met a hungry boy who told her, "Sometimes I cry, but only when it rains, so the other children will not see." Then she said, "You and I can help wipe away his tears."

She told about several refugee camps in Somalia, Ethiopia, Uganda and a little country called Djibouti, all on the Horn of Africa. "In one of the refugee camps water is so scarce," she said, "that the women dig in brown mud, and that's what they drink."

She told the children that millions of people would soon die in these refugee camps unless the world did something to help them.

In another refugee camp she met a little girl who owned nothing in life but a tiny ring with a red glass stone in it. The little girl had taken off her ring and given it to her to give to some child who, as she put it, “needed it more.”

When the beautiful woman had finished speaking, all of the students in Margie’s school crowded around her to thank her and to ask for her autograph.

When it was Margie’s turn she stepped up to her and took off the silver ring with the red heart in its center, gave it to the beautiful woman, and said, “When you meet a little girl in one of those refugee camps who needs a ring, please give this to her.”

Just then the teacher came up and said, “Oh, no, Margie, you shouldn’t give away your ring. What would your parents say?” But the beautiful woman said, “Let her give what she can. She may not always have so much to give, or the heart to give it.”

In today’s gospel, we encounter a similar kind of heart-filled giving. This is one of the most beautiful gospel stories ever recorded, full-to-overflowing with love and meaning. At the center of this story are Mary and her extravagant gift of anointing Jesus’ feet.

Now some people see this as a story of extravagant love; while others only see a story of foolish waste. It is one of the most interesting stories in the New Testament. Every Gospel writer included their own version of the story.

However, it is a most unusual story. In fact, it is a radical story because Mary, in a surprising way, takes center stage.

You see, in those days, it was unheard of for a woman to act like Mary. In the middle of a dinner party, she does something that was considered taboo for a respectable woman. She loosens her hair and lets it down, in a room full of men.

No one does that in polite company, except... you know, “those kinds of women”. But that is not all. She cracks open a bottle of pure nard, kneels down, and pours it on Jesus’ feet.

Now nard is a very strong, expensive perfume that comes from the country we know as Nepal. The amount she used was worth approximately one year’s salary of an average worker! Therefore, what she did would be seen as totally irresponsible, wasteful, and extravagant.

What makes it even more weird, is that she poured it on his feet and not his head. For those who were considered to be important such as kings or heads of state were anointed on their heads.

Can you imagine what feet were like in an ancient rural society where walking in the dirt and the heat wearing only sandals was the primary mode of transportation? But Mary didn’t care.

So if this wasn’t bad enough, Mary does something even more disturbing. She wipes his feet with her hair! So not only did she let her hair down, but she actually lowers her head to his feet and wipes his feet with her hair!

Now watching all of this was Judas. He could not believe his eyes. You see, Judas was the conservative one, the responsible one. He chastises Mary for her wastefulness. I hate to say it, but most of us can probably relate to Judas and the rest of the apostles in this story. We too would be criticizing Mary for her actions.

We do that, don’t we? We often criticize those who we see as not being in control – those who are unreasonable, impractical, wasteful, impulsive, irrational, or too emotional.

Yes, we like to have things under control. We don’t like to make fools of ourselves. Let’s be honest, we probably would have chimed right in with Judas.

We would have said; “Mary, what in the heck are you doing. Put your hair back up, and put the lid on that that bottle of expensive perfume!”

So what is going on here? How can we benefit from this story? Well, you see, I believe that this is a story of amazing worship and love. For Mary is in love with Jesus as her Lord. This is a love that knows no price. It is a love that will do anything to express itself. Oh, how many of us yearn to experience this kind of love.

But you see, to experience this kind of love, we must put everything on the line. For Mary, her reputation is being placed on the line. She does not care what other people in the room think about her actions.

For Mary, her money is being placed on the line. But she does not care. Spend it all for the moment – because at this moment, it is right. For Mary, it was worship at all cost. On the other hand, for Judas, there was no worship of Jesus.

The criticizing of her actions, and the comment about how that money could have gone to the poor was not really sincere, at least according to John’s Gospel. More importantly, Judas chose rather to worship himself. Instead of giving, he was more interested in getting. That came to fruition when he eventually betrayed Jesus for a mere 30 pieces of silver.

But Mary. When Mary poured out the perfume on Jesus’ feet, she was pouring out her heart – her love in the most extravagant means that she could.

I don’t know if she understood the big picture. However, I do think that she understood her immediate need; that was to show her tremendous love for Jesus.

When have any of us really expressed our love for Jesus? When have we been extravagant in our actions? When have we placed our reputations or our money at risk?

I am afraid that we are indeed more like Judas, playing it cautiously, always maintaining control.

But when we act like this, we are missing so much. For love is not fully experienced until we give it away. Let me say that again. Love is not fully experienced until we give it away.

That's what the wealthy industrialist Charles Schwab declared after going to court and winning a nuisance lawsuit at the age of 70.

Given permission by the judge to speak to the audience, he made the following statement: "I'd like to say here in a court of law, and speaking as an old man, that nine-tenths of my troubles are traceable to my being kind to others.

Look, you young people, if you want to steer away from trouble, be hard-boiled. Be quick with a good loud NO to anyone and everyone. If you follow this rule, you will seldom be bothered as you tread life's pathway. Except that you will have no friends. You will be lonely. And you won't have any fun!"

Schwab had made his point. Love goes beyond reason. Love also may bring heartache, but it's worth it. And how do we know that this is the case?

Because later, Jesus will show the ultimate in extravagant, unreasonable love. Jesus will also bring heartache. For he will give his life on a cross for the sake of others. You tell me. Was that not exceeding the limits of reason and extravagance? Couldn't Jesus have died a different, less painful way and still been the Savior of the world?

In this Gospel story, Mary is the picture of the fullness of the life of discipleship. Her act shows forth the love that will be the hallmark of all discipleship. She fulfills Jesus' commandment to love before he even teaches it.

She gives boldly of herself in love for Jesus, just as Jesus will give boldly of himself in love for us at his forthcoming crucifixion.

For just as Mary anointed the feet of Jesus, a few days later, while reclining at the Passover meal, Jesus will wash the feet of the disciples.

Now doesn't that also seem to be rather extravagant, beyond reason? Why would the master wash the feet of his followers? True love is extravagant. It goes beyond reason.

A few years ago, Carlos Rogers of the Toronto Raptors Basketball team was doing something incredible. He had worked long and hard to make it to the NBA. It was a dream come true. The promising future, the wonderful benefits were right before him. But Carlos was considering throwing it all away. You see, his sister was sick – very sick.

She could not survive without a new kidney. So Carlos Rogers left his job in the NBA to go home and donate one of his kidneys to his sister. He knew that it would end his career. But compared to his love for his sister, he didn't care. Unfortunately, his sister died before she could receive the kidney.

USA TODAY called Carlos Rogers the most unselfish man in the NBA. Now that is extravagant love.

Yes, Mary could have sold the perfume and gave the money to the poor. That would have been the reasonable thing to do. But remember, sometimes love goes beyond reason. It forces us to be irrational and spontaneous at times. It causes us to be extravagant.

Christ died for us. This is extravagant love. This is the love that we who call ourselves disciples are called to share. Not so that we might look good or be rewarded somehow. But that we might reflect the love that was given to us that day on the cross. For remember; love is not fully experienced until it is given away.

Mary knew this love. Perhaps we too can love in a way that exceeds the limits of reason and necessity. On our own we cannot. However, with Christ, we are given the power through the Holy Spirit. Dare to love extravagantly. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting.  
Amen.