

## **A STORY OF EXTRAVAGANCE**

John 12:1-8

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She stood in the doorway, the alabaster jar trembling in her hands. She had never before held something so costly, so extravagant. Her heart pounded in her throat, and she closed her eyes and inhaled deeply the scent of the perfume called nard - sweet and pungent, penetrating. Then she opened her eyes and looked at Jesus, seated there at the table. His disciples were there, too, some of whom treated her as an equal, and some who thought of her as an outsider and a sinner; and her brother, the miracle, back from the dead.

For a moment she held back, afraid. Then she caught his eye –clear and bold –and she remembered herself. She remembered why she had done what she did, spent all that money on something so precious and yet so frivolous. She knew. It was because of Jesus. And now was the time to do it: now, in front of all these powerful people; now, before she might lose him, as he had so often foretold. Now. She summoned all of her courage and stepped forward. When she opened the lid to the jar, the smell permeated the entire room, and every eye turned toward her. As she approached Jesus – her teacher, her friend, her leader –at first she meant to pour the oil on his head. Then she changed. She recalled all the times he had cared for her and for so many others who had been forgotten, shut out, left without hope. Overcome by the extravagance of his love, she began to weep. Instead of pouring the oil on his head, she poured it on his feet, feet that had walked so many miles to spread a message of good news. Her tears mixed with the oil, and having no cloth, she wiped them with her hair. She did not care a fig for how anyone might judge her. She merely wished to give Jesus her love and gratitude.\*

This is a story of extravagance. That jar of perfume, pure nard, would have been the equivalent of one person's wages for a year. Imagine a jar of perfume worth \$30,000 or \$40,000.

Was Mary so overwhelmed with gratitude because Jesus brought her brother Lazarus back to life? Had she perhaps purchased the nard to use in preparing Lazarus' body for burial? Or is this a story that prepares us for the death of Jesus...is it a story that foreshadows his death which will come soon, very soon?

It was the miracle of the raising of Lazarus which was the final straw for many of the religious authorities. It's one thing to turn water into wine. And those supposed healings, well, they were bad enough. But now people say Jesus raises the dead? Enough is enough. It's time to put this Jesus movement to a stop. He's getting too popular. That's what the religious authorities said. They were motivated by jealousy and they were motivated by fear.

We don't know what motivates Mary to pour out a jar of perfume onto Jesus' feet, except for this. Love. The kind of love that always motivates us to act extravagantly, to throw aside our logic, our careful planning, love that leads from the heart rather than the head. Mary anoints Jesus with oil because of love. The love she's seen in him. The love he has already poured out lavishly upon his world.

This is a story of extravagance, a story motivated by love. And also by a particular mindset.

Next fall, our church is going to host a weekend visit from one of the world's best-known Old Testament scholars. His name is Walter Brueggemann. In June, our first Tuesday book study group is going to discuss one his books, as we prepare for his visit. Anyone is welcome to join that group at any time. And I hope many of you will be here in October to hear Walter's lecture and to hear him preach.

I have heard him speak several times and have read many of his books. One of the lessons I remember from him is this. Brueggemann believes there are two ways to look at the world:

one is through the lens of scarcity and the other is through the lens of abundance. If you look at the world as a place of scarce resources, without enough to go around, you will be constantly anxious, nervous and fearful. You will be in survivor mode all the time. You'll want to grab all you can and hold onto it as tightly as you can.

If, however, you believe the world is a place of abundance, with more than enough for everyone, you'll feel a sense of calm and security. You'll hold onto your possessions more lightly. You'll live with open hands, freely passing along and sharing what you have.

Brueggemann is talking about our general, overarching view of the world. He's not giving us advice on how to live every moment of every day; this isn't investment strategy or home security advice, or even specific commentary about the environment which certainly does not have limitless resources. So don't take this too literally. But take it seriously. Think about how you view the world. Do you believe that God has given us a world of possibility or a world of severe limitations?

Which kind of world do you want to live in? Do you want to live in a world where the motto is: "Moderation in all things"? All things, really? Or most things?

Have you ever said, "I wish the world was less beautiful." "I wish my feelings of joy would moderate a little." Or "If only God wouldn't love me so much, wouldn't forgive me so freely, wouldn't be so quick to lift me up when I fall or direct me when I'm lost." I don't want to live in a world of scarcity and moderation in all things. I want to live in a world like the world of the Bible where surprises occur, where old women like Sarah laugh out loud when they find out they're pregnant, where the worst kind of sinners like David are forgiven and become kings, where short tax collectors like Zacchaeus are plucked out of trees and befriended by Jesus.

I want to live like Mary lived in our story for today. This home, the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus is a haven for Jesus. He's living his life in public. He's followed by crowds everywhere he goes. Like a modern-day politician, his every move is being observed, his every word criticized. No matter how much we find politics distasteful, sometimes I find myself empathizing

with the lives of the politicians. I can't imagine how exhausting it must be to be in the spotlight every minute of every day. They must have a haven somewhere, sometime - people looking out for their human needs, people protecting them from the crowds, places where they can put their feet up, relax, be themselves. We all need to feel that there are people around whom we can be ourselves, times when our words aren't scrutinized, people who give us the benefit of the doubt, places where forgiveness flows freely. The home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus was that kind of place for Jesus. They were those kind of friends. We all need need places like that, people like that in our lives. Ideally, our homes are those kind of havens. I like to think that the church can be, in that way, a second home, a home away from home where we can be ourselves but are also challenged to be our best selves.

Brueggemann will tell us that scarcity is not a biblical concept. Abundance is the worldview of the Bible, because God's love for us is limitless. There is more than enough to go around.

The writer and enormously popular public speaker Brene Brown writes and talks about scarcity, too, from a more psychological point of view. She says that we live in a culture of perceived scarcity, of "never enough." Brown says we start off the morning thinking we didn't get enough sleep, go through the day thinking we don't have enough time, and fall asleep thinking we we failed to accomplish enough tasks. Whatever we have, do, or get, it's never enough.

And throughout the day, as we interact with others, we are painfully aware of what we're missing: looks, smarts, talent, luck, money, peace, creativity—you name it.

But here's the problem. Not only are all of these comparisons discouraging and even debilitating, they distort and hide the tremendous gifts we have been given.

Regardless of our culture of perceived scarcity—or our individual circumstances—we all can point to assets, blessings, and gifts in our lives.

Yes, there are a million things we don't have. But there are a million that we do. If we can see through the right lens, we have all been given more than we can possibly ask or imagine.

That lens is called gratitude, and it's a lens that amplifies everything good in our lives instead of causing it to shrink to insignificance.

While it's the easiest thing to fall into a scarcity mentality, gratitude helps us cultivate a mindset of abundance. When we develop the mindset of abundance, we are both more grateful and more generous, even - sometimes - extravagant.

Mary's act of extravagance is not for show. This is not a gaudy display of wealth; she is not trying to attract attention, nor is she wealthy. This is a spontaneous display of love. How else do you thank the person who brought your beloved brother back from death? How else do you prepare your beloved friend for the journey that will likely end in his own death? For what possible purpose are you saving your expensive perfume if not for this one?

There's a time for counting the cost, and there's a time for extravagance. Your good china wouldn't be special if you used it every day, but if you never use it, then you're missing something.

Extravagance is generosity when our giving is directed at the recipient, not pointing at ourselves. If we throw an extravagant dinner party and spend all of our time talking about how extravagant we are, we miss the spirit of generosity and abundance all together. It's only extravagant, in the biblical sense, if it's motivated by love.

In the summer of 2013, Doug and I traveled in Europe as part of my sabbatical. One of our favorite places was the Cinque Terre region of Italy. On the coast of the Mediterranean, the Cinque Terre is five little towns that spill down from hillsides right into the water. One night we took the ferry from the town where we were staying to the next town for dinner. It was a beautiful night and we ate dinner outside. When you're in a foreign country and you don't speak the language, you rely on a combination of guesses and gestures. I can speak French, and so I could

make out a few words in Italian, a language with many similarities. I perused the menu and saw something that looked to me like a tasting menu, of mostly seafood. Since we were eating dinner a few feet from the sea, and since we both like seafood, we thought it would be a good thing to order. So we ordered, both of us, the seafood tasting menu.

The first few dishes arrived, and we began to enjoy absolutely delicious seafood salads, very ample portions, much more than we had expected to receive. And then the hot food arrived. A tray was set on the table between us with four different warm seafood dishes. We dug in. It was the first - and only - time in my life that I had eaten fresh anchovies. I thought anchovy were the disgusting slimy things some people eat on caesar salad or pizza. But these were entirely different, mild and tasty. We ate almost everything, and were so grateful to be in one of the most beautiful places we had ever been. We breathed in the sea air, looked at the beauty around us, our stomachs full of wonderful Italian food. "Ahh, a wonderful evening," we thought. And then another full tray of food arrived. And then, if I remember correctly, three more trays after that. I don't know how many people can eat seventeen courses but I'm not one of them. After a while we just laughed at the ridiculous amount of food that was set in front of us. Another couple at a nearby table had made a similar mistake. Evidently, for one thing, the tasting menu is meant to be shared, not doubled.

The next day we hiked from one end of the Cinque Terre to the other, trying to work off all of that food all the while appreciating the beauty of our surroundings.

God had a lot of choices about how to create this world. There's no reason it has to contain fields of wildflowers, and songbirds, and majestic mountains, and oceans with leaping dolphins, and drop-dead gorgeous sunrises. It's really too much, it's over-the-top, it's extravagant. Thank goodness. Thank God. Thank. God.

\*The re-telling is from Joyce Parry Moore.