

Extravagant love

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts on the Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 13, 2016.

You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me. John 12:8

Time is drawing near for Jesus. He knows that the religious leaders are plotting against him. He is fully aware that his mission will culminate in his trial and death in Jerusalem. He could choose to avoid it all by going into hiding, but instead he chooses to stay in the open.

Here we see him visiting in the town of Bethany as a guest in the home of Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus. It was customary in those times to show hospitality to guests who have been traveling to wash their feet and apply an oil to sooth their weary feet.

This story is recorded in all four gospels. Luke's account tells of an unnamed woman, a sinner, who bathes Jesus' feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. In Matthew and Mark, the unnamed woman pours oil on Jesus' head and the disciples rebuke her for using the costly ointment, but Jesus defends her kindness.

In this account by John, it is six days before the Passover Feast and Martha is preparing and serving the meal while Mary uses a costly perfume to anoint Jesus' feet. The oil is from spikenard, an ancient plant with a strong aroma that fills the whole house. It is expensive, costing what is roughly equal to a year's wages. Among the disciples gathered with them is Judas Iscariot who complains that Mary is wasting the oil that could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Judas is feigning a concern for the poor while he has been helping himself to the common treasury. Jesus tells Judas to leave Mary alone.

Using the expensive oil is not too extravagant for this special guest. The poor will always be with them, but Jesus will not. Her act of kindness anticipates the anointing of his body after his death. Most likely, Mary may very well have used what was left over of the oil to anoint his body in preparation for his burial in the tomb.

Much has been speculated about Jesus' close relationship with Mary and other men and women. Mary and Martha and Mary Magdalene and the young disciple John are among his closest friends. We can appreciate their profound devotion they had for each other. The speculation that Jesus might even have been married and had a family doesn't take away anything from who he is and what he means to us. It only strengthens our understanding of his full humanity. The costly oil used to anoint him is symbolic of the love between them. The example Jesus' sacrifice for us came at a great cost. For him, it was worth it. His sacrifice tells us that when we love people for their own sake it costs us in terms of our emotional commitment. We can't put a price on what it means to love and to be loved.

Practicing our Christian faith means giving ourselves to God unconditionally and without counting the cost. We need to ask ourselves if we give our very best or do we hold back? Are we willing to take risks for others or do we play it safe? Alone we can do little but together we can accomplish great things. A viable congregation is willing to use its resources to the fullest to serve God's people in every way. The only limit to our effectiveness as a community of faith is the limit of our imagination.

Our responsibility as stewards of our resources isn't a matter taking care of our own before reaching out to those beyond our membership. We do both. We care for others as we care for ourselves. I once knew of a church that set its quota of outreach at fifty percent of their entire budget. The only way that could happen is for the members of that congregation to be so totally committed and generous in their giving that their own needs are balanced with the needs of those beyond their membership.

Mary's extraordinary act of humility foretells Jesus washing the feet of the disciples on the night before he died. His whole life and ministry is to serve rather than to be served. Being serious about our Christian faith means pouring out God's love in service to others, especially with those who are disagreeable and unlikeable. As the perfumed fragrance filled Mary's home, the mission to serve God's people fills the whole world.

The inequities between the rich and the poor in our nation continue to grow. The power centers in Wall Street, Madison Avenue, Congress and the Pentagon have a tight grip on our lives. Just as Jesus was in conflict with the civil authorities of his time, the power structures in our own time are being confronted. The systems that are in control of our lives need not be inevitable.

I don't know about you, but when I read and hear about federal spending and mounting debt, I can't begin comprehend that amount of money. The portion of our income that we pay in taxes is relatively small compared to the total federal and state budgets. What we owe to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts we'd like to think goes for the common good.

What seems extravagant to one may not seem so to another. It is not extravagant to support public education, healthcare, municipalities, representative government, parks and recreation areas, public safety, libraries, highways and veterans to name a few things that are part of our way of life. Those who have the least reason to complain about high taxes are those who are quite willing to shell out a good portion of their paycheck for the lottery. Whatever we give for God's purposes is never enough in return for what we receive from God. The value of love we have can only be measured in what we give away.

As we anticipate entering once again into the great drama of Holy Week and the Easter festival, keep in mind the meaning of Christ's sacrificial love for us. Was it worth it? Like the expensive oil, it was very costly, but it was worth it.