

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

"Wasteful Extravagance"

Scripture: Mark 11:1-11 and 14:3-9

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Palm Sunday

April 5, 2020

What sort of gifts are you accustomed to giving your loved ones?

What sort of gifts are you comfortable receiving?

Do you prefer giving and receiving gifts that are lavish and extravagant?

Or do you prefer presents that practical and modest?

I remember one year

My dad declared that the new dishwasher

Was a birthday gift for my mother.

Sounds kind of mean, rather cheap.

But he was a guy who would spurn a \$200 present

For a pair of work gloves that fit just right.

I think that many of us are culturally measured

In our gift-giving and gift receiving.

We tend to being economical and practical in our presents.

We tend to be uncomfortable with the largess of others.

How would you feel if your neighbor

Gave you a case of wine for Christmas?

Most would be uncomfortable accepting this gift.

“It’s too much. It’s too expensive” we’d tell them.

All the while we’d be suspicious about what they
Were trying to get from us.

Or imagine if someone left a painting to our congregation.

Not just any painting but a work of art
from a member of the ‘Group of Seven’.

Would we enjoy this gift?

I think we’d spend lots of time worrying about it.

In the end I think it would be deemed too extravagant
And too valuable to ever display in the church.

Rather than being welcomed and enjoyed (as it was intended)

The painting would be crated and sold.

PAUSE

Today’s Bible lesson tells a story about the giving

And receiving of a lavish offering.

Jesus is in Bethany, a suburb of Jerusalem.

It was a town he’d often stay over at
during his visits to the city.

Jesus is reclining at a table,
Maybe enjoying the conversation after a meal,
When all of a sudden, a woman enters the room,
Opens an expensive-looking jar,
And pours perfume over Jesus' head.

As oil runs down his face and hair
And the scent of 10,000 roses permeates the room.

Now just to be clear it wasn't unusual for guests
To be anointed when visiting a home.
It was an act of honor and hospitality
That Jesus himself refers to in Luke 7:46.

What was unusual in this case
Was the incredible value of the oil,
The perfume that was poured on Jesus' head.

I did a little research and one of the most expensive perfumes
I could find is a scent made by Hermes.
"24 Faubour" goes for \$1500 US per ounce.

Pretty pricey, eh?

We are told that the perfume poured on Jesus was made of nard.
And the best nard came from far-away India
Which made it even more expensive
Than that scent from Hermes.¹

A quick ball-park estimate from the disciples
Put it at a year's wages for a laborer
Which is around \$30,000 in contemporary terms.

We are told that the disciples weren't impressed by the offering.

The disciples' reaction might have been different
If she made a tax-deductible donation
to Jesus and the Disciples Ministries Inc.

But she took that \$30,000 and poured it on Jesus' head.

It is astonishing for someone, this unnamed woman,
To make such an extravagant offering.
Definitely not a Presbyterian.

But equally amazing is the fact that Jesus accepts it.

We are not told that Jesus argued with the woman,
Or held out his hands to keep her away.

No, we are told that he welcomed her gift, her offering.
He says to his arguing disciples:
"Leave her alone...
She has done a beautiful thing to me."ⁱⁱ

They are thinking: 'What a waste!'
And Jesus declares: "How beautiful."

You should know that in Biblical times
That anointing wasn't just an act of hospitality.

It was used to set people apart.
Kings, priests, and prophets were all anointed.
The promised one was called the Messiah, the 'anointed'.

It was also a way
That people care for the dead.

Jesus didn't spurn the lavish gift of this women.
He didn't question her intentions.

He simply accepted it as spontaneous and uncalculatingly,
Selfless and timely,
A way to honor his body before his death.ⁱⁱⁱ

PAUSE

We live on the other side of the cross and the empty tomb.
More than those arguing disciples, more than the generous woman
We understand the great claims Jesus made.
We understand why
he didn't shy away from his own death.

So are we willing to welcome the extravagant gift
Of the one traded in his life for our lives,
So that we might receive forgiveness
and experience peace with God?

Are we willing to welcome a gift so expensive, so lavish?

And are we willing to respond wholeheartedly?

Are we willing to offer our hearts to Jesus in return
In ways that defy common sense?^{iv}

I'm not simply talking about gifts to the church,
But the way we live our very lives.

Are we willing to offer ourselves to Christ
as what the Apostle Paul describes as 'living sacrifices'?
Are we willing to let our entire lives be worship?^v

It is amazing to realise what can happen in the world
When people are willing to offer and to receive lavish gifts.

Some of you may recall having watched
The 1987 Danish film, "Babette's Feast".

Listen to this summary:

"The elderly and pious Protestant sisters Martine... and Philippa...
live in a small village...in 19th-century Denmark.

Their father was a pastor who founded his own Pietistic conventicle.

With their father now dead

and the austere sect drawing no new converts,

the aging sisters preside over a dwindling congregation
of white-haired believers.

The story flashes back 49 years, showing the sisters in their youth.

The beautiful girls have many suitors,
but their father rejects them all,
and indeed derides marriage.

Each daughter is courted by an impassioned suitor...
Martine by a charming young Swedish cavalry officer...
and Philippa by a star baritone... from the Paris opera...

[But both] sisters decide to stay with their father
and spurn any life away from [home].

Thirty-five years later, Babette... appears at their door.
She carries only a letter... explaining that she is a refugee
from counter-revolutionary bloodshed in Paris
and recommending her as a housekeeper.

The sisters cannot afford to take Babette in,
but she offers to work for free.

Babette serves as their cook for the next 14 years,
producing an improved version of the bland meals
typical of the [austere] nature of the congregation
and slowly gaining their respect.

Her only link to her former life is a lottery ticket
that a friend in Paris renews for her every year.

One day, she wins the lottery of 10,000 francs
[which was a lot of money in those days.]

[But instead] of using the money to return to Paris
and her lost lifestyle,
she decides to spend it preparing a delicious dinner
for the sisters and their small congregation
on the occasion of the founding pastor's
hundredth birthday.

More than just a feast,
the meal is an outpouring of Babette's appreciation...

The sisters accept both Babette's meal
and her offer to pay for the creation of a "real French dinner".

Babette arranges for her nephew to go to Paris
and gather the supplies for the feast.
The ingredients are plentiful, sumptuous, and exotic,
and their arrival causes much discussion
among the villagers.

As the various never-before-seen ingredients arrive
and preparations commence,
the sisters begin to worry that the meal
will become a sin of sensual luxury,
if not some form of devilry.

In a hasty conference, the sisters and the congregation
agree to eat the meal, but to forgo speaking of any pleasure in it
and to make no mention of the food during the dinner.

Martine's former suitor...

now a famous general married to a member of the Queen's court,
comes as the guest of his aunt,
the local lady of the manor
and a member of the old pastor's congregation.

He is unaware of the other guests' austere plans
and as a man of the world and former attaché in Paris,
he is the only person at the table
qualified to comment on the meal.

He [captivates] the guests with abundant information
about the extraordinary food and drink,
comparing it to a meal he enjoyed years earlier
at the famous Café Anglais in Paris.

Although the other celebrants refuse to comment
on the earthly pleasures of their meal,
Babette's gifts [slowly] break down
their distrust and superstitions,
elevating them physically and spiritually.

Old wrongs are forgotten,
ancient loves are rekindled
and a mystical redemption
of the human spirit settles over the table."^{vi}

The sisters assume that Babette will return to Paris.
Only later do they discover
That she spent her entire winnings on the meal.

PAUSE

If you pay any attention to the news,
You've been hearing stories about the incredible sacrifices
Of health care workers:
People who are self-isolating from their own families
And exposing themselves to incredible risk each day.

You have also heard of people
Accepting the kindnesses of their neighbors.
Offers to run errands and buy groceries.

So will WE be too proud to accept the generosity of others?
And will WE be too tight-fisted
to lavish others with extravagant care?
I hope not.

For it is in giving and in receiving
That we will experience the abundant life that God has for us.

Amen.

ⁱ See Richard A Burrige "John 12:1-8" *The Lectionary Commentary: the Gospels* 539

ⁱⁱ Mark 14:6 NIV

ⁱⁱⁱ The types of gifts that Jesus welcomes in Lamar Williamson Jr. *Mark* 249

^{iv} Ibid

^v See Romans 12:1

^{vi} "Babette's Feast" *Wikipedia*