

Sermon "Gifts are Tricky"  
Kirk of St James  
Sunday April 6, 2025  
Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

Extravagant gifts have a way of making us uncomfortable. Maybe it is the attention they draw to us, or feelings of unworthiness that sometimes arise, or perhaps even cause what feels like an imbalance in a relationship. I had a friend in seminary, we had bought gifts for each others birthdays, and I had picked out a pair of earrings for her, and then I opened her gift. An antique copy of one of my favourite books, wrapped in a beautiful white handkerchief. The thought, trouble and expense she went to still bothers me to this day. I laid awake for about three nights in a row saying the words "earrings" in various disgruntled ways. I felt terrible and I still feel terrible and it has been over fifteen years.

Today's gospel reading in John involves an extravagant gift, that becomes a moment of dissension for all those involved. Embarrassment, anger, hypocrisy, discomfort, and confusion are only some of the emotions that come into play. While this account is framed differently in the gospels depending on which one you are reading John places this moment in the home of three of Jesus' beloved friends. Mary, Martha and Lazarus have all been introduced in the chapter before. In chapter 11 Jesus hears that Lazarus has died and when he goes to see the family, it is Martha who first goes to greet him. Martha comes across as detail oriented and practically minded, while Mary is more emotional. If we were to give them modern labels, we have a type A Martha and a type B Mary! Their brother Lazarus has been dead for four days, and it was believed in the ancient world that the soul or spirit departed the body after three days. So by recording this detail they are well beyond any type of hope. Then Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead.

It is this moment, six days from Jesus' final entry into Jerusalem that things shift. When some of them realized how much power Jesus had—to even raise people from the dead, they were panicked. They ran to the Pharisee's and reported what had happened. The chief priests and Pharisees called an assembly, their fear being if he continued to preform miracles like this everyone would start to believe, and then Rome would respond and take everything from them. While Jesus is sitting with his friends around the table, others are plotting his way to the cross.

At this point in time Martha has confessed to Jesus that she believes he is the Messiah, Lazarus is likely shaken after his much-more-than-a-near-death-experience, and trying to figure out how he is going to live this resurrections life, and the disciples are confused as always. It is a permanent state of being for them. The friends and disciples of Jesus are gathered around the table, Martha is serving the food, and then Mary makes an absolute scene. I cannot imagine how uncomfortable this moment is for those present.

First there is the tension sometimes shown between Mary and Martha and their approach to life in general. Then for those present at the table Mary coming in with her hair down in order to do this would be what N.T Wright describes as being at a modern polite dinner party when suddenly one of the women stands up and pulls her dress up to the tops of her thighs. "You can imagine the onlookers reaction. Had she no shame? What was she trying to say—to Jesus, to the onlookers? All sorts of disturbing thoughts must have been flying round the room." There is already tension in the air with all the things Jesus has said and done to warn them about the violence being plotted against them. I can only imagine Martha thinking, "For goodness sake Mary, can you not just sit down and be normal? Why is it always like this?" Yet out of everyone in the room that day it was Judas the unfaithful disciple who truly revealed his nature—a hypocrite, a thief and a betrayer.

Judas does not care about the poor, he does not care that they have enough to get by. He does not care that Mary has wasted the perfume—he cares that he never got to take a cut out of it beforehand. Judas who pretends to be a faithful disciple, and as far as we know not under any suspicion of theft let alone betrayal at this point, said what they were all thinking. What a waste. But Mary, she understands. “Jesus has already been anointed for his costly mission in his baptism by John, and now Mary anoints Jesus for his costly death with her pound of costly perfume. Like John, Mary is a witness and disciple—not by what she says but by what she does.” Plus generosity in God’s Kingdom does not take it away from somewhere else, if anything it multiplies it.

One writer phrased it this way, “To reflect on the miracle of generosity will lead us to reflect on Jesus. Throughout the fourth gospel, Jesus provides a blessed abundance. At Cana, 180 gallons of new wine are created, even more than a wedding crowd can consume. Five thousand hungry people are fed by the Sea of Galilee, with twelve baskets of left overs remaining. After fishing all night without results, Simon Peter is instructed by the risen Christ to cast his net on the other side of the boat. Immediately 153 large fish begin jumping into the net. As John states, Jesus is the one through whom everything was made. There is abundance wherever he is present.” And sometimes the things we give generously disappear much like the perfume. For example the choir might work for a particularly long time on a piece of music and then after it is sung it over. Teachers prepare lessons, and then students leave the classroom. We send flowers to people when they are celebrating or grieving, and eventually they wilt. What is offered in love is never lost. Music echoes in our hearts, lessons help us grow, and flowers can bring joy or comfort. The perfume that was spilled over the feet of Jesus was preparing him for something much larger.

It is odd then that one of the most important points of this passage becomes one of the most difficult for people to understand. Some who read this scripture passage have taken the phrase “You will always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me” as an excuse not to help people. However, that is a misreading of scripture. What Jesus is saying echoes words in Deuteronomy 15:11 where Israel is told, “open your hand to the poor because there will never cease to be some in need.” Ethicist and theologian Stanley Hauerwas said it this way, “It is to the poor true extravagance is to be given. The true church always has the poor in its midst, always treasures the life of the poor.”

By the end of the passage the person you think might be rebuked for waste, or how she anointed the feet of Jesus becomes the example of how we are to live our faith, and Judas shows us what it is to be narrow in our thinking in God’s kingdom. Perhaps the most abundant part of this entire story is the fact that “the grace of Jesus includes them both, both the faithful and the unfaithful. Both are included within the bright transforming light the cross casts in a dark world.”

Just as an aside, I wonder sometimes how we define poor. In my travels I have sometimes come across people who seem to have everything but are completely miserable, and I have met those with almost nothing, who live in boundless joy. To be thankful, to be kind, to be generous—are those things abundance? And for the narrow, the judgemental, the unthankful—I consider those things poor.

Within the story this morning, Martha working in the background, Lazarus listening, the disciples being present, Mary’s offering and Judas and his hypocrisy—most days humanity is a mixture of all of it. However, the good news, the abundance, is that there is room for all in Christ’s kingdom if we are willing to accept it. The healing of Lazarus becomes the event that ultimately leads to the death of Jesus, next Sunday is Palm Sunday and then we enter into Easter Holy Week. As we prepare to follow may we take a little time this week to consider what abundance in God’s Kingdom look like, and may we continue to answer the call to love and protect those who need it most.