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 Fifth Sunday of Lent

Extravagant Generosity
John 12:1-11, 1 Kings 17:8-16

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ² There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³ Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them^[a] with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii^[b] and the money given to the poor?" ⁶ (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) ⁷ Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it^[c] so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸ You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

⁹ When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰ So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, ¹¹ since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

This story of Mary anointing the feet of Jesus has often been ***merged*** with the similar story of the ***unnamed woman at Simon's house***, who does this in Mark 14:3-9, and an ***unnamed woman, a great sinner***, who does it in Luke 7:36-50.

But here in the Gospel of John it's very clear that this woman is ***Mary***, the ***sister of Martha and Lazarus***.

This is Mary, who ***sat at the feet*** of her Lord to learn from him, while her sister Martha worked in the kitchen.

This is the same Mary who ***saw her brother Lazarus*** raised from death by Jesus, after being in the tomb for four days!

The scene is a meal to ***celebrate Lazarus'*** resurrection.

Jesus is often found celebrating at table, and some of his most meaningful ***words and actions*** happen at ***meals***.

This time is *no different*.

But what *Mary does* at this meal,
anointing the feet of Jesus with an expensive oil called spikenard—
it is truly *extraordinary*.

Washing a guest's feet was often expected in Jesus' day,
as a sign of hospitality, especially because they wore sandals.
Ordinary hosts would provide the water, so guests could wash their own feet,
but in *wealthier* houses, the washing was done by a servant,
and it was the *lowliest* of all services (1 Sam 25:41).
Anointing Jesus' feet with expensive oil would have been *unexpected*,
especially by a woman, using her own hair,
and to use such oil would have certainly been considered *extravagant*.

In Luke 7, *Jesus contrasts Simon's neglect of giving Him water* for His feet,
with the woman's washing His feet with tears and wiping them with her hair.
Later, on the last evening of His life, *Jesus will wash the disciples' feet*
in John 13, and told them to show love the same way.

Reading about Mary's gift, makes me wonder:
Wow—would I have done this for Jesus?

Listening to the story of the widow who fed Elijah makes me ask the same
thing—*would I have done that?*

Truth is, our gifts, our generosity *say something about us*,
And about the *people who receive* our gifts!

I wonder, do we realize what a *difference we make* in this world--
With our gifts? Our generosity?

I think that sometimes we forget that even our *smallest actions* have a ripple
effect in the waters of life....
I once heard a pastor say that, "*History turns on small hinges*".
How true.

Do you think that *Mary knew* her story would be told over 2000 years later?
Do you think the *widow* knew that her choice would affect us, centuries later?

They were **ordinary** people, making some **extraordinary choices**—
that changed the lives of people who received their gifts,
and continue to change our lives today
with their examples of **trust, love, and generosity**.

Elijah, the widow, and Mary, they all **trusted God**—
when they were at a difficult time in life.
Mary and Martha saw their brother die,
the widow and Elijah were starving in a land of famine.

Isn't it amazing how **God uses our difficulties to teach us so much?**
Just when we feel like we've run out...**God provides**.
And not just enough, but **more** than enough.
Enough for us to **give**, and give extravagantly!
Isn't that amazing?

Think about Mary—
what if it was your sibling, who was raised from death?
What **would you do** at a meal for Jesus--To show your love, and gratitude?
Would you do what she did?

You know, after our story in 1 Kings 17, in verses 17-24,
the widow's only son dies, and **Elijah raises him from death!**
Did you know these two stories were so connected?
That's no coincidence.

For **Elijah and the widow** their actions were about **trust and faith**,
that the jar of oil, and jug of flour wouldn't run out, and it didn't!
The widow who was an outsider, a heathen, yet she had so much faith
that she fed Elijah first! Before herself and her son!

Mary had such love and faith that she poured a whole bottle of nard
on Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair!

Do we have that **kind of faith? Of Love?**
Do we have the kind of faith that leads us to **give generously**, like Mary?
Mary could have used that expensive nard for many other things—it was used
for perfume, cosmetics, medicine, burial...

And it would have **lasted** a very long time!
It was worth 300 denarii, or about a year's average **wages**!

This is what **Judas is upset** about,
asking why this was not sold to help the poor,
but John tells us that Judas was a thief, helping himself to their money.
Jesus says—that's not the point, Judas.
You will always have that opportunity to help the poor,
but this is for my burial.
In other words, **let her show this extravagant love.**

And by the way,
it's the very **same kind of love that Jesus will show.**
In fact, the word for her wiping his feet,
is the **same word** for Jesus wiping the feet of his disciples in John 13,
at the Last Supper,
when he tells them to love one another as he loved them!

When I think of Mary, I ask myself—**would I have done this?**
Would I have shown such generous, extravagant love to Jesus,
having seen his great power and love for my sibling?

And would I have **taken the risk** to love in this way?
She was a **woman**, touching a man who was not her husband, at a meal.
She had her **hair down** in public, and was using it to wipe his feet.
And, she was using a very expensive **oil** to do this.

One of my favorite authors is Brene Brown,
and I've been reading her book **Daring Greatly.**
She's a great author and you can find many of her TED talks on YouTube.
In her book *Daring Greatly*,
she begins with the famous quote of Theodore Roosevelt
about true courage being the person
who is not just watching and commenting about life,
but who is actually in the arena, getting dirty, and doing the work of life, '*who
at best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst,
if he fails, at least fails while **daring greatly...***'

Brown is a sociologist, and researcher who studies **vulnerability.**

Which may sound odd, but she writes about being '**Wholehearted**', which basically means being **real**, which includes being vulnerable.

Brown, Brene. Daring Greatly. Penguin: New York, 2012. Pgs. 1, 9.

Now if there is a **vulnerable person** in this story of John's Gospel today, it is definitely **Mary**.

What if Jesus **objected** to her actions?

What if she was **asked to leave** the meal?

What if she was **ridiculed** for her behavior?

Instead, she is **praised by Jesus**,

and **remembered** to this day for her generous and extravagant gift of love!

I think the question is, **how can we love like this?**

To show our generosity, and **gratitude** to God?

How can we **give generously**, because of God's great gifts to us?

I once had a pastor say at the offering,

"I will not give that which costs me nothing."

That stuck with me.

Do we give what costs us something?

This gift certainly cost Mary and her whole family, not just the money,

But her reputation!

We have reason to give out of love,

Because **God HAS raised Jesus for us**, our closest friend and Savior!

So, what is our **response**?

I once realized, it's **not a leap of faith** if we give just what we have leftover, — or something that we'll never miss.

So, how can we give that which **costs** us something?

What if we give, when we have to trust God to provide for us?

just like the widow, and her son, and Elijah?

What if we give,

when **we don't think we have** anything to give?

In Luke 12:2 Jesus saw a **widow putting in two small coins** into the temple offering box—and Jesus said she gave more than anyone else.

Did you ever think of what it meant that she gave **TWO** small coins?

In other words, she had a **choice**.

She had TWO coins, not just one.

Now, I don't know about you, but if I had just 2 coins in all the world, I would probably just give ONE to God, not both.

To be real honest I would be worried about giving ANY of it to God!

Would you show such generosity and love, in that situation?

There is **such power in a gift** that comes from trusting God,

In a gift that comes from **gratitude and love!**

Aren't those the gifts that **change lives?**

Just think about the saints who have given right here—

those are the loving gifts that **make it possible for us**

to raise up the kids and youth in this church, and reach into our community, and around the world to Malawi, Africa!

Did you know that we have 102 active members in this church, and in addition—we have 39 active kids and youth!

They're here, some on Sundays, some on Wednesdays but yes—39!

That's amazing my friends.

And it's **only possible through generous gifts**, gifts of love.

Isn't there **power in extravagant giving?**

And you know who knows this power better than anyone?

Usually it's people with less means, not more.

I'm always convicted by how **generous impoverished people** can be.

It's a fact that people with less money

give higher percentages of their income than those with more.

Why?

Because they know that **God is the provider, and** they **must** rely upon God.

When we have **extra** we tend to be more **selfish**.

We think that we earned it, it's ours, and we need to keep it.

But that's *not the kind of God we believe* in, is it?
 We believe in a *God who is a giver*.
Generosity is a character trait of God,
 and of the kingdom of God that Jesus preached about!

This makes sense when we think about it:
 God *gave us* creation,
 humanity,
 love and care...
 God gave us his only son Jesus.
 In his ministry, his life, his death, and his resurrection...
 do you get the idea?

Our God is a giver. And the kingdom of God is about generosity!
 That's why we're called to give, generously, lovingly,
 Because it *changes lives, especially ours*.

When have *you been transformed* by an act of loving generosity?
 I know I've been on the *receiving* end of such love,
 And given the *opportunity to show* that kind of love.
 What about you?

And when have you *seen what God can do---*
 With a little jar of oil and jug of flour?
 When have you thought that running out is a *real possibility*.
 But I'm going to give out of love?

I've told you before about churches in the northeastern Indian state of
Mizoram who have a beautiful phrase to express the way they give to God—
"Buhfai Tham." Which means "one handful of rice at a time."
 At every meal a family sets aside a portion of rice---for God.
 When they collect enough rice, they donate it to their church.
 The church sells the rice, and they have collected millions this way!
 One church member said, "It is not our richness or our poverty that make us
 serve the Lord, but our willingness.
 So we Mizo people say, **'As long as we have something to eat every day,
 we have something to give to God every day.'**"
 Paul Pastor, "Giving Is Global," Leadership Journal (Spring 2013).
 Wow.

I think what we learn in the Bible is that **God meets us**
 Wherever we are...even in the hardest times,
 And that's **exactly when** God says--Trust me!
 and be generous,
 because you will always have more than enough.
 Generosity begets more generosity and love.
 Mary's story of anointing the feet of Jesus,
 The widow's story of unending oil and flour,
 These stories are **inspiring**.

But, if we're honest, we realize they go against some of our **human nature**.
 Where we are hardwired to keep, to store, to survive.
 And we don't usually go around spending a year's wages on a single gift, right?
 Isn't it **only human** to believe that we can't give so extravagantly?

So, **What would it take for us to....**
Be that generous, and extravagantly, give?

The same God who fed 5,000 people with a boy's lunchbox of fish and bread,
 is the God who gives to us **today**.
 That's **God's kingdom**.

Friends, God has **given us EVERYTHING**.
 God has given us **new and eternal life**.
 What if we truly **believed, and understood** this?
 Wouldn't our hearts just burst with **gratitude**?

Isn't that what we see in Mary's extravagant gift?
 A display of **love, and generosity**?

How will we give, to show our love and gratitude to God?
 How will we give of what we **have**?
 How will we give **ourselves**?

Friends, hear the **Good News** of the Gospel for you today!
Loving generosity—that's **who** we are, and **what** we believe--
 About our amazing **God**,
 And about our **lives** as followers of Jesus.
May we love Jesus just as Mary did, And all God's people said, Amen.