

April 3, 2022
"Open-Hearted, Open-Handed"
Isaiah 43:16-21 / John 12:1-8
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

Last week we reflected on the "Parable of the Prodigal Son" – a story really more about a prodigal father and his expression OF and invitation TO prodigal love; again, prodigal meaning wasteful, but also generous, excessive, extravagant.

Generous, excessive, extravagant love.

Oscar Wilde once wrote, "Where there is no extravagance there is no love, and where there is no love there is no understanding."

I'd say that about captures the essence of this week's story from John's gospel, as Theresa just read for us – picking up right where we left off last week. It could well be the sequel to THAT story, but BOTH provide a preview as we continue our Lenten journey with Jesus through the wilderness and ever closer to the cross of Holy Week.

THIS story is primarily about Mary, the sister of Martha. And sister of Lazarus, whom Jesus – as described in John's previous two chapters – has just miraculously raised from the dead. That, too, a preview of things to come.

Judas accuses Mary of EXTRAVAGANCE and WASTE. Judas, of course, one of Jesus' chosen twelve disciples, and the one who we're reminded in the text is about to betray him.

SIX DAYS before the Passover and the NIGHT before Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem (which we will recall next Sunday with palm branches), he's in the village of Bethany, just outside Jerusalem, as a dinner guest of his close friends, Martha, Mary and Lazarus.

As the prodigal father threw a party to celebrate his son who was lost and had been found, who was dead but had come home to life, perhaps THEY are throwing a party to celebrate Lazarus – who was apparently, literally, dead and brought back to life.

But Mary's mind and heart is elsewhere.

She anoints Jesus' feet with a pound of costly perfume, wiping his feet with her hair. This is a profound act of love for Jesus, a sacred ritual mirrored BY Jesus when he washes his disciples' feet – as described in the NEXT chapter of John.

“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” Judas asks, self-righteously and publicly calling Mary out. Shaming her. Three hundred denarii, it should be noted, the equivalent of a full year of laborer's wages.

Jesus seems to know Judas' heart, to know already that Judas will betray him, but we also get a little narrative aside from the author of John's gospel (GESTURE LIKE A SECRET): “(Judas) said this NOT because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief.” Apparently Judas liked to help himself to the common purse, the funds set aside for community care.

It's as if Judas is saying what he thinks Jesus would want him to say, what he's supposed to say. It's clearly not sincere, heartfelt. Judas' heart and hands are not in the right place.

But Mary's are.

Jesus responds by defending her and her act of love. “Leave her alone,” he says. She intended this perfume for the day of my burial, for the traditional anointing of the body. Jesus knows what's coming, and so does Mary. In other accounts where Jesus acknowledges to his disciples that he will suffer and die, they don't believe it, or they don't want to believe it. They don't get it. No one seems to get it.

But Mary does.

“Where there is no extravagance there is no love, and where there is no love there is no understanding.” Mary UNDERSTANDS Jesus, and she understands where Jesus' path of generous, excessive, extravagant love is taking him in a political and religious context so threatened by the social impact of such love in practice. Again, Mary's own act of generous, excessive, extravagant love is a preview of things to come.

And here she – in stark contrast to Judas – is the favored disciple.

So Jesus defends her, and then offers this, calling out Judas' hypocrisy: "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." Beyond the rebuke of Judas, this text has long been controversial regarding an understanding of poverty on a larger scale.

It's provocative, but it comes off as cynical, even fatalistic, right? As if Jesus believes the social and economic injustice of poverty is inevitable. On the surface, it doesn't sound like the revolutionary Jesus.

Two quick points to make here:

First, I think we get some insight from a similar account in Mark's gospel. It's the same basic story, but neither Mary nor Judas are named. And we get a more elaborate response from Jesus:

"Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

It's curious, then, that Mary is not actually named to better remember her along with what she has done, but in any case, hear the emphasis not on the PERMANENCE of poverty, but on the PERPETUAL OPPORTUNITY for compassion and generosity.

We get further insight when we understand that, in responding as he does in both accounts, Jesus is invoking Mosaic law; specifically here the laws delivered through Moses concerning the so-called "Sabbatical Year" and the year of Jubilee – laws based on the rhythm of weekly Sabbath and meant for wholesale social and economic restoration and remission.

From Deuteronomy 15: "There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a

possession to occupy, if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today." Again, the laws, if kept, are clearly meant to prevent poverty and injustice from ever taking permanent hold.

IF kept. And so there is within the law acknowledgment of the human tendency to act otherwise, to turn away from each other, to turn away from love embodied on a collective level as justice: "If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be HARD-HEARTED or TIGHT-FISTED toward your needy neighbor. You should rather OPEN your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake."

And then this, as Jesus echoes in his response to Judas: "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'"

Jesus knows Judas' heart. He knows his HARD heart and his TIGHT fists. And perhaps in his response he's also acknowledging the so often hard-hearted and tight-fisted nature of human tendency. But he's pointing us back to the spirit of the Law and the reminder that compassion and generosity are always the way to justice; there is always, will always be, the opportunity to show compassion and generosity. The opportunity to be open-hearted and open-handed, both as individuals and, AND as a collective society. Because social change, including an end to poverty as God intends, does not, cannot, ultimately come through individual acts of generosity. Charity address the symptoms; justice addresses the cause.

Still, in this moment, in the context of this story, with the fragrance of her anointing perfume heavy in the air, Jesus places Mary's individual act within that broader social covenant. With that covenant, he celebrates Mary's open-heartedness. Expressed in her open-hearted UNDERSTANDING of the moment at hand and ITS most pressing need – her understanding of Jesus' need and of what was to come for him, and so for her and all those who loved him and sought to follow his way of love.

And he celebrates her open-handedness. Expressed in her simple, but profound, OPEN-HANDED act of generous, excessive, EXTRAVAGANT love. Extravagant yes, but not wasteful.

“Where there is no extravagance there is no love, and where there is no love there is no understanding.”

So here's to extravagance! Here's to the kind of open-heartedness that keeps us attuned to and ready for the vision of change and renewal described in our reading from Isaiah:

“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”

Here's to the kind of open-heartedness that leads us, personally and communally, to open-handedness – to generous, excessive and extravagant love in action. To ways in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. To a new thing.

May the vision and practice of such love guide us through the rest of our Lenten journey and into Holy Week. And may the vision and practice of such love guide us ALWAYS, from death into life made new.

May it be so.