

Journey to the Cross III: Mary's Extravagance

Mark Trotter who was Senior Minister of First United Methodist Church of San Diego from 1976 to 2000 told a true story about a man in New York City who was kidnapped. His kidnappers called his wife and asked for \$100,000 ransom. She talked them down to \$30,000. The story had a happy ending: the man returned home unharmed, the money was recovered, and the kidnappers were caught and sent to jail.

But, don't you wonder what happened when the man got home and found that his wife got him back for a discount? The American humorist Calvin Trillin wrote about this incident. He imagined out loud what the negotiations must have been like: "\$100,000 for that old guy? You have got to be crazy. Just look at him! Look at that gut! You want \$100,000 for that? You've got to be kidding. Give me a break here. \$30,000 is my top offer."

Mark Trotter concluded his rendition of the story with this thoughtful comment:

"I suppose there are some here this morning who can identify with the wife in that story, but for some reason I find myself identifying with the husband. I'd like to think if I were in a similar situation, there would be people who would spare no expense to get me back. They wouldn't haggle over the price. They wouldn't say, 'Well, let me think about it.' I like to think that they would say, 'We'll do anything for you.'" (Mark Trotter 4/2/95)

The point of that story is this: sometimes it's O.K. to be extravagant! Now, that is precisely what this story in the Gospel of Mark is all about. Mary brings an alabaster jar of very expensive ointment. She breaks open the jar and pours the costly perfumed oil on Jesus' head... she anoints His head with oil. But the story doesn't end there. Mary (after doing this beautiful thing) is criticized by some of the folks in the room. The Gospel of John says that Judas reprimanded her for being so wasteful. And then Jesus reprimands Judas for being so "stingy."

Stinginess means being overly concerned about money... sort of like the kidnapped man's wife, who obviously felt that money is real important.

Maybe she reasoned like this: "Which is easier to replace, a husband or \$100,000?" That is stingy thinking, materialistic thinking. That is the Judas mind-set. That's the way Judas thought. "What a waste! Look what we could have done with all the money we could have gotten from selling that perfumed oil. Think of how many poor people

we could have fed!”

Now, Judas didn't intend to do that... in fact, it wasn't even his oil, but it sounded good... and Judas was probably surprised and taken aback when Jesus complimented Mary on what she had done.

I so appreciated setting up the Hall on the second Sunday in December for Inn From the cold. For there were our kitchen team setting the table with a beautiful bouquet of flowers, candles and other items that made the setting particularly appealing. They didn't just come in and whip something up at the last minute. Their act was one that said "we care". It was extravagant. Or the people who have been able to offer money to help buy the filters Graham and Iris will be taking to Morocco. There was a willingness to give because these people knew that for them it was the right thing to do.

Yes the Mary mind-set says, “Sometimes in the name of love and kindness and gratefulness, it's O.K. Indeed, it's beautiful to be extravagant.” Let me show you what I mean.

I. First Of All, It's O.k. To Be Extravagant In Our Generosity.

That's what Mary was doing. It was a beautiful act of sacrificial generosity.

It is worth mentioning that this is one of the few stories that is told in all four accounts of the Gospel. The example of this woman was such that it was to be preserved.

As we read through the verses that follow in the Gospel of Mark we note that none of the other characters show this kind of generosity. At the time when these disciples are entering into a crisis that will result in their all deserting Jesus, Mary is the one person presented in a light that shows us that she is living her life as Jesus lived his. At verse five we are told that this ointment was worth 300 hundred denarii. A denarius was the usual days wage for a labourer.

Over in John's gospel he adds the detail "The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. There are a couple of things to be noted here. This suggests to us that when we are extravagant in our generosity it will touch others in ways that enrich their lives. At the same time each of the accounts of this story also tell us that there were those who objected to what Mary was doing. That is those who didn't appreciate and understand her act. I find it helpful to see in the story that their objections didn't discourage Mary or dissuade Jesus from commending her.

Generosity will often garner both criticism from some and will touch the lives of

others the way the perfume sweetened the room. As those who are living as followers of Jesus to be extravagant in our generosity grows out of knowing Jesus.

Perhaps you can think of a time in your life when the same act of generosity has elicited both responses. If you have you are in good company.

II. Second, It's O.k. To Be Extravagant In Our Gratitude.

Maybe that's what Mary was doing that day in Bethany – expressing her indescribable thanksgiving to Jesus. Sometimes words just aren't big enough and perhaps this extravagant act was her way of trying to say "thank you" to her Lord for all that He had done for them... and for the most recent act of calling her brother Lazarus out of the grave.

Let me share with you a wonderful story about a woman who was known far and wide for her grateful spirit. Even when she was diagnosed with terminal illness and told that she only had three months to live, still she maintained that twinkle in her eye, that terrific sense of humor, and that radiant spirit of gratitude. She went to see her pastor to plan her memorial service, and with a laugh she told him, "Don't you make this a somber or sad occasion or I'll come back to haunt you! I've had a great life and I am so thankful for so many things, so let's concentrate on making this a celebration of my life in this world and the next."

Together, she and her pastor selected the hymns and the scriptures and then she said, "Oh yes, there's one more thing... I want to help you with your message." "How's that?" asked the minister. And she said, "I want to be buried with a fork in my right hand." The pastor blanched a bit and she said, "Are you shocked by that request?" "Curious," the pastor replied.

The woman went on to explain: "In all my years in the church I have attended so many eating meetings... dinners, brunches, luncheons, potluck suppers... and my favorite part was when they were clearing the tables after the main course and someone would lean over and say, 'You can keep your fork.' That was my favorite part because I knew that meant that something better was coming! I was so grateful for what I had already had... and now something better was coming!"

"So, when people come to the funeral home and see me there, they are going to say, 'What's with the fork? What's with the fork?'... And then at the service you can get up and tell my story... and you can tell them for me that I am so grateful for what I've already had... but I'm keeping my fork because I know that something even better is coming!"

Let me ask you something:

Do you have that kind of victorious spirit?

Do you have that kind of deep faith?

Do you have that kind of extravagant gratefulness?

Gratitude is not something we only express when life is going well. Mary, for instance, knew that Jesus was about to be crucified. John tells us that after Lazarus was raised from the dead the Jewish authorities wanted to kill him as well as Jesus. Thus there was a lot of pressure in their home at this time. But Mary had a grateful heart because like the woman I just told you about she had a perspective that was shaped by her faith in Jesus. It is the very same perspective that Paul speaks of when in Romans 5 he writes We also boast in our sufferings knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character hope, and hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

III. Third And Finally, It's O.k. To Be Extravagant In Our Graciousness.

One thing is clear. Whatever meanings scholars may attach to Mary's act of anointing Jesus with precious oil, it was without question an act of love and kindness and graciousness.

That is Mary did this thing for Jesus because he meant so much to her. Gracious acts grow out of knowing we are loved and wanting others to know we love them. Mary did not allow her attention to focus on Judas' criticism. She kept her gaze fixed on Jesus. So while Judas went up one side of her and down the other she did shoot back with a biting retort. Rather she continued to minister to Jesus.

As we grow in living for Jesus may we all pray that his spirit will make our souls gracious. For it is so easy to counter gracelessness with hurtful, damaging words and actions. As we look at the hours in which this event takes place there will be much that is graceless as Judas betrays Jesus, Peter denies him, the Jewish leaders make up lies about him, Pontius Pilate washes his hand of any responsibility, six hundred Roman soldiers mock and beat him. Then finally his beaten and torn body is hammered naked upon the Cross.

Mary's act of extravagant grace stands out in stark relief to everything else found in this chapter and the next.

As we meditate on Mary's example may her character touch our own so that we more fully live as people who are extravagant in our generosity, extravagant in our gratitude and extravagant in our graciousness.

Jesus said that "Truly I tell you that whenever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her". He said this because Mary's extravagant life embodies the good news of Jesus Christ.