

## “They Gave Everything”

A sermon based on John 12:1-8 and Philippians 3:4b-14

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By David Oliver-Holder

When it comes to love, how much is too much? Where should we draw the lines? That’s one of those hard, hard questions, kind of like the one Peter put to Jesus one day. “If a member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?...” And to try and suggest that he was very forgiving, Peter tossed out a number, the number of perfection. “...As many as 7 times?” “On the 7<sup>th</sup> day of creation, God rested. Surely, Jesus, we could rest, maybe we should rest, after forgiving someone seven times.”

We all remember what Jesus said in reply. “Not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”(Matt. 18:22) We can imagine some in the crowd thinking, “Why, that’s crazy.” To which Jesus might have said, “Yes, it is. It’s crazy divine.”

It’s crazy just like other things that Jesus said. What should you do if someone smacks you in the face? “Turn to them the other cheek.” What should you do if a Roman soldier makes you carry his gear a mile, as the law allowed? “Carry it another mile.”

Such actions are so unexpected, so beyond the ordinary, so crazy, that they break open reality so that the divine can flow in. The kingdom is among us, Jesus said. And sometimes it breaks through normal everyday life when his disciples do such crazy, bewildering, extravagant things. John helps us remember one of those extravagant displays today.

## II

For a few years I have been fascinated by wine. I’ve known since high school that there is a deep, rich and ancient culture surrounding the cultivation of the vine, but I really saw how much I had to learn when a great wine shop opened just a few blocks away from where Jean and I lived in Louisville, Kentucky. We had love, but not much money in those days, so our exploration of the world of wine didn’t get very far.

My fascination reignited after seeing the movie “Sideways.” Paul Giamatti and Thomas Haden Church play two middle-aged men, who take one last fling through the Napa Valley of California before Church’s character gets married. The major flaws of the two men make for delightful comedy, but those flaws are also highlighted through

exploring the nature of the different wines they sample and enjoy during the week. The comedy made me curious to know more.

In the weeks leading up to my trip to Geneva several years ago, I got on the mailing list of a wine shop there, thinking I might buy a nice bottle of French or Italian or German wine while I was there to bring back and enjoy with Jean. I remember looking through one of the shop's newsletters, and seeing a bottle of 1985 Domaine Romanée Conti Grand Cru. It's a red wine from one of the most famous estates of Burgundy in France. It's a wine most of us will only ever read about. You know how much it was listed for? \$9,250.00.

Lucky for me that there are so many genuinely good wines that are not nearly so expensive. Lucky for me, too, that I have a much bigger curiosity for books. The 16<sup>th</sup> century scholar Erasmus once said, "When I get a little money, I buy books. If any is left over, I buy food and clothes." That captures me, and it's one of my qualities that my long-suffering wife finds so charming.

But in contemplating John's Gospel this week, I wondered what Jean would have done, if I had, somehow, bought that bottle of Burgundy wine while I was in Geneva. And what if I had drunk it with one of my dear friends, who I knew had only one week left to live. Jean is a deeply caring person, who knows how important dear friends are, but I suspect she would have responded like any one of us, had I done something so crazy as that. She would have said, "You did what? Are you kidding me?!"<sup>i</sup>

### III

John begins his Gospel, after his prologue, by telling us about the first miracle Jesus performed. Jesus was attending a wedding in a place called Cana. He was asked only to help keep the celebration going, but John tells us he did something so extravagant it was crazy. He turned common ordinary water into what would have been 600 bottles of the best wine, a wine like a great Burgundy. Measured in today's dollars, 600 bottles of that kind of wine would have cost \$5,550,000.

It was divine extravagance, for human celebration, and it was a glimpse of what the kingdom of God is like. Here, in chapter 12, John bookends the ministry of Jesus with another story of crazy, bewildering extravagance. When it comes to love, how much is too much?

In chapter 12, John tells us how Jesus came to Bethany and stayed at the home of Lazarus. This was not that long after Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. So, of course, Jesus's friends are delighted to host him for dinner. Can you imagine how awkward the dinner must have been? Certainly, they are all overjoyed to have Lazarus back, but he had been in a tomb just a few days before. Now he's at dinner.

Do you remember the movie "Castaway," starring Tom Hanks? Hanks plays a man who works for FedEx. Helen Hunt plays his girlfriend. They have been in a relationship for some time. They want to get married, but his busy schedule keeps getting in the way. They are planning Christmas with family, when a problem in Malaysia calls him away.

The plane crashes in a violent storm. All are lost except Hanks, who washes up on a desert island. Four years later, Hanks finds a way to get off of the island and into a shipping lane, where he is rescued. When he returns to civilization, he finds himself a celebrity. All he wants is to see his girlfriend.

But Hunt's character has moved on. She waited and waited, hanging on every effort to find the lost plane and its crew, but after months and months, she gave up hope. When Hanks' character finally returns, she is married, and the possibility of their relationship resuming as it was is gone. When they finally do meet again, it is so awkward. She still loves him, and is so thankful he is alive, but everything has changed. Might that meal with Jesus have been something like that?

They are all so glad that Lazarus is alive again, but everything has changed. Mary certainly has changed. She is filled with gratitude to have her brother back. She loves Jesus so much she has to express it in some crazy way. So she takes some perfume that she has, and without words, anoints the feet of Jesus. John tells us that its value is equal to a year's worth of wages. Everyone knew it had to be good because the whole house was filled with the fragrance.

Who knew that Mary, or Martha or Lazarus, had such means? Could Mary have bought the perfume just for that dinner? Maybe. John says she bought it, yet the way he writes it suggests she had had it a long time.

I wonder if it was a part of her dowry.<sup>ii</sup> Dowry's were a much bigger part of that culture than ours today. If a woman did not have one, she very likely could not be

married. So, by using the perfume to anoint Jesus, Mary did much more than give away an extravagant gift. If it was a part of her dowry, and likely a very large part, she also gave away her prospect for marriage, and the security that would have come with a marriage, and the place of honor in her community conferred by marriage.

What she gave was a true sacrifice, and in so doing, she ended up acting as a prophet, foretelling what would happen to Jesus in a week's time. Her affectionate anointing foretold and prepared for Jesus' death, and his ultimate sacrifice of his life.

So it had to be an awkward dinner, filled with irony. Here was Lazarus, back from the dead, and he would end up outliving the One who raised him.

#### IV

When it comes to love, how much is enough? Everything we know from scripture assures us that, for God, there can be no measure of how much God loves us. The miracle at Cana points to such extravagance. Jesus' sacrifice of himself, which is foretold by Mary's anointing, is the supreme expression of such extravagant love.

So, how do we respond, once we are made aware of such a love? Well, we do what we can.<sup>iii</sup> "That's what we do in our Lenten disciplines. We do what we can.

Mary's anointing didn't save Jesus from" what lay ahead for him. "Nor will our Lenten practices solve our every problem. But with Mary we do what we can. We give our old selves to God without restraint, all that we have and all that we are. In return, we trust God for a renewed self shaped by God's unlimited love." Genuinely getting a sense of God's extravagant love might lead us to do something so unexpected, so out of the ordinary, that our friends and neighbor will think we've gone crazy.

The Apostle Paul tells us one way he did that. The vast majority of people of his day would have considered his achievements highly honorable. He was very well educated, part of an exclusive group of experts. Racially, he was as pure as any Hebrew could be. But he also was as bigoted as the white supremacist down the road. He stood on his purity to look down with contempt on any and all who were not Jewish and who were not devout. So sure was he of his righteousness and purity that he was willing to harass and persecute and even kill those who willingly practiced other faiths.

All of that changed when he met Jesus on the road to Damascus. He told the Philippians that knowing Christ had forced a profound re-evaluation of his life and his religious credentials.

This changed perspective lies at the heart of the Gospel as it was seen through Paul's eyes. It is as if he took out the ledger of his pluses and minuses and switched everything. He rearranged the price tags of his life. Great upbringing, worthless. Racial purity, worthless. Excellent education, worthless. Religious devotion and achievement, worthless.

Are you kidding me? Was he crazy? He didn't seem to think so. To the contrary, he gave all of that away, along with all of the benefits of his achievements, so that he could follow where Christ might lead him. He then put all that he had left to work, so that others might come to know this extravagant love God has for us.

Like Mary, he did what he could. And that is the good news for us today. We differ from Paul in our religious accomplishments, and we likely do not have something like that container of perfume which was worth a year's wages. But each one of us can do what they did. Each of us can do what we can.

Our Lenten disciplines are all about cleaning out and clearing away all of the things that get in the way of our sense of God's extravagant love. We're preparing for Easter. God doesn't call us to give more than we have, nor to do more than we can.

Mary shows us the way. In response to God's extravagant love, she did what she could. When it comes to love, or responding to it, how much is too much?

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<sup>i</sup> Daniel B. Clendenin, "'She Did What She Could' Mary Anoints Jesus at Bethany, on the Journey With Jesus website, for Sunday, March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

<sup>ii</sup> From a comment by Bonnie in response to David Lose's article, "Questions About Discipleship," on the WorkingPreacher website, posted on March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.