

John 12:1-8

When I was in seminary my father loaned me \$3,000.00 to use toward my living expenses. A plan was in place to repay him once I was out of school and working. For my graduation gift my parents gave me a card with the note, "Your debt has been forgiven. You no longer owe us \$3000.00." What an amazing gift that was for me, one I never expected. Asking for the money in the first place made me feel embarrassed, unworthy, but the gift left me speechless, again feeling embarrassed, unworthy. All I could say was, "Thank you. I never expected this."

Many times, when we receive a gift that touches us in such a way our first response is, "You shouldn't have." Of course, we don't mean it when we say that, we are humbled by the magnitude of the gift. But then again there are times that we really do mean it. The gift may have made us feel beholden, indebted to the giver. Or we truly may feel that we aren't worth what the gift implies. Like once, a boy who I really liked as just a friend and no more, gave me a pair of expensive earrings as he said, "I want our relationship to go further than just friends and I hope you'll accept these earrings." They were like a pre-engagement ring to him. I couldn't accept that.

And then, there are times when an extravagant gift provokes anger. The husband of a woman I know sold her car and bought her a new one while she was in the hospital. She liked her old car and was used to driving it. She was very angry that her husband hadn't consulted her before purchasing a model of car that she didn't like and didn't feel comfortable driving.

Anger was the reaction that the extravagant gift to Jesus from Mary evoked. Here we are, approaching the end of Lent when we hear the story of Jesus' anointing, something that is related in all four gospels, but in a different way by each gospel writer.

In the gospel of John, what we heard this morning, the anointing took place five days before the crucifixion, or as the reading says, "Six days before the Passover," so, it is no wonder that Jesus makes the connection between Mary's extravagant gift and his burial. It is unlikely that Mary saw that meaning behind it. For her, it was a pouring out of self and soul; it was an act of surrender and of giving to the one she came to love so deeply. She didn't think about the cost, only the giving.

It was the love behind the gift that Jesus recognized. He didn't think about the cost. The Gospel writer John saw this act as a foreshadowing of Jesus' own act of service and giving at the Last Supper, which is only a few days away in the gospel of John. This gift from Mary shows Jesus that she understands the sacrificial and loving service that Jesus gives to his followers and expects his followers to imitate.

In a world where smells were not always pleasant, especially the smell of feet that walked through everything and anything that was thrown or dropped on the ground, can you imagine how the smell of that perfume must have changed the environment? Sometimes when we walk through a department store perfume aisle our breath is taken away because the mixture of the smells is not pleasant. But what about those perfume samples that come in the mail? Sometimes they are simply lovely. Their odor permeates the entire envelope, and when it appeals to you, you can't wait to discover what it is that smells so wonderful. Mary was giving that type of gift, something that benefitted Jesus, but everyone there could enjoy it.

When we think of Mary, we think about her sister Martha. They are a pair, always talked about together. What was Martha's role in today's reading? The only comment about Martha that appears in this story is the two-word phrase: Martha served.

As I said, this event is related in all four of the gospels, each of them in a different setting. When we consider who complained about the extravagant gift, who was angry because it was given, Matthew tells us the complainers are "the disciples". Mark simply says, "some were there." Luke tells about a woman anointing Jesus, but she does it with her tears and hair and Jesus talks about forgiveness, not about his death. Only in the gospel of John do we hear Judas grumble, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"

Well, we know why John includes the comment from Judas... he knows the cost of everything. But does he know the value of anything? He could, and did, question why Mary would waste money, sort of like saying, "you shouldn't have", but it wasn't out of the false humility shown by a grateful receiver, no, he was angry. He didn't say the money from the sale of the perfume should go into their treasury so he could steal it, he wasn't quite that bold. Instead, he condemned Mary's loving gift as wasteful.

It's strange that John would include such a comment about one of Jesus' disciples being a thief. Is he setting up the betrayal for 30 pieces of silver? Or is there more to it. Did John have the same thoughts (that the gift was wasteful) and just wanted someone to express his opinion for him? Because if that was the case, Judas was the perfect scapegoat. John wouldn't have admitted that he had those evil thoughts himself, that he was jealous, even as he was writing the gospel that he wanted to be gifted in such a manner, so he gave those words to Judas....

Yet, as Jesus points out, no gift that is given in love is wasteful, no matter how extravagant it may have been. No act of service, when given in humble love, can be demeaning.

But then we get to that last verse. Giving to the poor is a typical theme in the gospel of Luke, who writes almost in solidarity with the poor, but Luke didn't say anything like these words of Jesus in his gospel. It's as though John is concerned that when Jesus rebukes Judas for his words, he thinks those who come to follow Jesus might take this as a free pass to ignore the poor among us.

"You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." What does that mean? Give to Jesus more extravagantly; give to the poor out of duty? Give to Jesus everything; give to the poor some things? Give to Jesus always; give to the poor when you can?

This is one of the mysteries of the gospels. Many people have trouble with this verse. But I find it hard to believe that Jesus would ask us to back off giving wholeheartedly. Someone suggested that perhaps Jesus is once again speaking to our experience, giving us a warning about how our lives are sometimes lived out. It's clear that he is trying to get across to his disciples that it is nearly time for his life on earth to end, but could it be that what Jesus is saying to all of us is that when we give to the poor, we are giving to Jesus? When we see the faces of those to whom we are giving, are we seeing the face of Jesus?

No matter the reason, what we are to take from this lesson is that we should give and serve out of love, with extravagance, to the glory of God. We should give so that those who receive will say, "You shouldn't have." Even though we know we should.

All glory be to God.