

EXTRAVAGANT DEVOTION

John 12:1-8

David B. Keller
March 21, 2010

TEXT: John 12:3 Mary took a point of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume."

PURPOSE: To recognize how Jesus uses extravagant devotion to him to not only to bless the one so devoted, but to invite others into loving relationship with him.

DEACON: During the season of Lent, Pastor Keller is presenting dramatic portrayals of characters in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' passion about whom we know very little, but who likely became disciples following his resurrection. Today's character is Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead. Unlike the other characters who have been presented to us this Lent, Mary was devoted to Jesus before his death. Today's gospel lesson tells the portion of her story that links her to his passion. Pastor Keller will speak as Mary.

Let us pray: May the words we hear, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Yes, you may remember me as Martha's sister, (Luke 10:38-42) the one who sat at Jesus' feet and left her to do all the work of serving our guests. I never liked that way of being remembered, because it made people think that Jesus preferred me to Martha. That wasn't how Jesus was. And I wouldn't want people to think that how I was with him was a way he valued more than other ways people shared his life. But I did sit at his feet, as often as I could. Which was, in those days, not the place for a woman. We were taught that learning was for men, and serving was for women. Jesus presented himself as a servant, and welcomed all people to be his students. Men or women, servants or students, in his presence, there was no rank or distinction.

I knew how to serve, and I did my share of it. As our parents aged, all of us, myself right along with Lazarus and Martha, were totally occupied with tending to their needs. Although, even back then, I was the one who could just sit with them for hours, not needing to do anything, just content with being there. It was the same when our brother Lazarus took ill. It really was terrifying for Martha and me. We feared what life would be like for us, two unmarried women, if we did not have our brother to provide for us. Both of us did everything we could to help him get better, but after we had done everything, I was the one who sat beside his bed.

Martha was upset that Jesus didn't come when we sent for him. I honestly can't remember what I was thinking, what I was feeling, during those days. I vaguely recall

having some sense, beyond thought or emotion, that whatever happened, it would turn out for the best. When Jesus brought Lazarus back to life, I was overjoyed. But Jesus didn't linger at the celebration of his recovery. It was dangerous for him to be that close to Jerusalem, or for that matter, to be out in public at all. (John 11:54) So when he came back some time later, the gratitude I had been holding released in a flood. Looking back, even I now think that what I did was more than I should have. What was I thinking, to rub his feet with that fragrant paste? And right away I discovered I'd used way too much. That's why I was wiping it off with my hair. It was so much that the smell of it overpowered the whole room. The food tasted like perfume. I guess I pretty much spoiled the evening. Truth is, I wasn't *thinking* at all. I was loving. And I had no thought of what anyone else thought about what I was doing. But when Jesus said that what I was doing was anointing him for burial, that shocked me out of my devotion. From being overcome with gratitude, I was suddenly overcome with a foreboding fear. But I was not one to try to figure things out. He knew what he meant, I thought, and that was all I needed to know.

I didn't go in to Jerusalem for the Passover. We kept the feast in Bethany, with some relatives who had children. But that Friday morning, when news came to us that he was going to be crucified, then, I went in. I wanted to be right there at his feet, right where I'd sat before, but the others wouldn't let me get that close. So I stayed with them, at a safe distance, hoping that he knew I was one who would not leave him in his hour of need.

When the news came that he had risen from death, I recall being filled with joy, but not particularly surprised. After all, he had raised our brother; and he had told Martha that he himself was the resurrection. (John 11:25) I longed to see him, once again to sit at his feet. First Mary Magdalene, then some of the disciples, said they had seen him. But he didn't appear to me. I tried to be where I thought he would be. I met with the inner circle whenever I could. I wandered in the garden where he used to go to pray. But every appearance took place somewhere that I wasn't. Everyone who saw him was overjoyed, transformed by the experience. I was increasingly distracted. My ability to just sit and trust was pockmarked with restlessness and resentment. I couldn't understand. He once had told me that I had chosen the better part, and that it wouldn't be taken away from me. (Luke 10:42) But now, it felt like it had been taken from me.

At the same time, I was becoming a bit of a legend. The others took my anointing as prophetic. "You knew, Mary!" they said, in great admiration. "You were always the most spiritual of all of us. You knew he was about to die, and your extravagant anointing proved it!" But that wasn't me. On that day, coming with that ointment, I had no special

insight. On that day, I wasn't even thinking, really. I was just expressing gratitude and devotion in a way I felt led to do. And then, for certain, I still had no special insight. In fact, I was finding myself in an increasingly dark place.

The eleven told the rest of us that they'd seen him taken up into heaven (Acts 1:9). I thought, there goes my last chance to see him. It felt like my faith had been taken away as he had been taken away. I was among the believers, but I didn't know what to believe. Of course I believed those who had seen him, but I kept wondering, why didn't he come to me? And I couldn't tell anyone what was going on inside me, because they all were making me out to be such a spiritual person. How could I say, you're all wrong about me?

Then, when things were about as distressed inside me as they could be, Stephen, one of the first Deacons, was arrested and stoned to death. That provoked a persecution against all the believers around Jerusalem. (Acts 8:1) The leaders had wanted to get Lazarus right from the beginning, so he and Martha and I were especially vulnerable. We had to leave our beloved family home in Bethany, and if it hadn't been for the hospitality of other believers in the towns we visited, we would have been in the worst of straits.¹

Martha and Lazarus saw our uprooting as an opportunity to spread the news about Jesus. Lazarus in particular had a story to tell, and he was eager to tell it. He always wanted me to come along when he spoke, even though he didn't expect me to say anything, since I never had. That was fine with me. I just sat at his feet and pretended to be praying. He couldn't tell the difference, but I could.

It's not that I didn't stop trying to get out of my fog. Every Lord's day, I gathered with the others, listened to the speakers, sang the songs, shared in the breaking of the bread. Every day, I set aside time to be alone, to seek his face. And no matter what, there was nothing. Just my own thoughts, and increasingly, those thoughts were not the thoughts I wanted God to know about.

The church was getting organized. More and more, we were settling into ritual ways to remember Jesus. With so many believers who had never even met him, it became more important to build some consistency into the movement. Not that I cared about such things. I had never needed them, and I was not the kind of person who got involved in the organizational stuff. But it was the organizational stuff that pulled me out of my dark place.

¹The Eastern tradition holds that Mary, Martha, and Lazarus left Bethany in the persecution following Stephen's martyrdom, and eventually settled on the island of Cyprus, where Lazarus became the first Bishop.

On the same night that he gave us the bread and the cup as ways to remember him, he also washed the disciples' feet. (John 13:1-15) It was a story Peter especially loved to tell, because he, true to his personality, had at first refused to let Jesus wash his feet. But now, the people who had been there that night were remembering that Jesus had instructed them to wash each other's feet. So, they decided to have a service that did just that.

I was there the first time we did it in the little gathering that Lazarus, Martha and I were attending. Keep in mind that footwashing was a regular ritual in those days, but it was typically done by a servant when a guest visited someone's home. Even so, doing it as a ritual had us feeling a bit foolish. Some of us were sitting, and others were kneeling, holding a bowl, a pitcher, and a towel. There was this stranger kneeling in front of me. I knew her name, but she was fairly new, and, since I wasn't one to socialize, I didn't know anything about her. She looked up at me and smiled. I could tell that she wasn't the least bit uncomfortable. "This is so wonderful," she said. "I am getting to play the part of Jesus."

For just a very fleeting moment, she seemed to me to *be* Jesus, revealed to me but then, just as quickly, gone again, just a woman at my feet. I looked at her again, and I saw myself, kneeling before Jesus at that dinner, rubbing his feet with that perfumed ointment. The woman's hands expressed great tenderness, as mine had that night. Again, for just a moment, it was as if I was Jesus, and she was me. For the first time in months, I wasn't thinking, wasn't trying to figure out what was going on. I was enjoying the sensation of my feet being washed, then patted dry, but more, I was, finally, without asking for it, aware of the presence of Jesus. Was it his feet being washed? Or him doing the washing? If I thought about it, it was just this strange woman and me. If I stopped thinking, it was Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.

I got up from where I had been sitting. The woman stood up as well. I hugged her, a hug that drew me into light. "Thank you," I said. "I can't tell you how much that meant to me." "It was nothing," she said. "I am a servant. When I'm not here with the followers, it is one of my regular jobs in my master's house."

"Your turn," I said. "Oh, no, I couldn't let you. It's not right," she protested. "Nonsense," I said. "The plan was for everyone to have their feet washed. Besides, I've done it before, too."

"You are a servant?" She asked. Her question made me think of Martha. "Yes," I said, "I am." She sat. I put the bowl under her feet and poured the water. I looked up at

Extravagant Devotion
March 21, 2010
page 5

her, and she smiled again, and again, for just a moment, I thought it was Jesus sitting there.