

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, March 6, 2016)

Texts:

John 12:1-8 (NRSV)

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound 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. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **"Lavish Love"**

(This short dramatic sketch between Pastor Donald ("PD") and liturgist Connie Gililand began our reflection time.)

PD: I knew it. I just knew it. All that oil, gone to waste. He keeps preaching about helping others, but he let it happen. What is his problem? Why doesn't he practice what he preaches?

Connie: Look, what's done is done. Don't get so upset about it. You know this has been a difficult time for him, for all of us. So a little oil got used to soothe his feet....is that such a crime?

PD: You don't get it, do you! We have so much work to do. We could have taken that oil, sold it and used the money to help others.

Connie: Yes. But maybe right now there is something more important than that. Maybe we should turn around and offer some comfort to Him for all he has done for us. Maybe there's something more about giving to him AND giving to others he's trying to teach us.

PD: You are hopeless. You just cave in to anything He says.

Connie: I prefer not to think of it as "caving in" but rather as really beginning to listen to him and to understand what he is all about. We do need to take of others and of each other. The poor we will always have with us. But we don't know how long we will have Him with us. He spoke of his burial. He seems to know something we don't. We just need to trust him and pay better attention.

PD: You'll never get rich with that attitude.

As I lived with this beautiful but what can be a bit disturbing story this week of Mary washing Jesus's feet, I marveled at the extravagance shown and what the meaning of such an act of lavish love can be for us living today.

If you were here last week or have been listening to me at all over the last few years, you know that I grew up in a pretty religiously conservative environment first in Sarasota, Florida and then nestled in the mountains with the Mennonites of the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. The Mennonites were and still are what could be called "People of the Book," that is, that for most the Bible, with both

its old and new testaments is an unerring recording of the will of God for our lives and, as noted in Wikipedia has been, “accepted as a unified locus of authority.”

I thought it was also interesting to note in that same entry that, “the term “People of the Book” in the Qur’an refers to followers of monotheistic Abrahamic religions that are older than Islam [which includes all Christians [and] all Children of Israel ... In Islam, the Qur’an is taken to represent the completion of these scriptures, and to synthesize them as God’s true, final, and eternal message to humanity.”

To me, this points out once again the ridiculousness of the strife and enmity between some who would practice the primary religions and have as our point of origin and focus of our faith the one true God who is above all and through all and in all. But that’s a sermon for another day.

Or is it? Since what it really all comes down to is God’s lavish love available for all of us no matter who we are or where we find ourselves on life’s journey. Do you sense an ongoing theme here?!

The reason I brought up my own early faith background, however, is to highlight what can be the rather “disturbing” part of the scene we have before us today. When this story was told many times during my religious upbringing I don’t remember any emphasis being given to the sensual nature of what’s happening here as a woman, formerly of ill repute, having had seven demons cast out of her, enters a room full of men and kneels at the feet of Jesus, whereupon she breaks open an extremely expensive bottle of perfume and proceeds to wash his feet with both it and her hair. Hello! That’s a pretty intimate and bold thing to do anywhere, but especially in a society where the sexual mores between men and women are so highly regulated and prescribed.

If you view this scene through a contemporary lens as you can literally do in films such as “Jesus of Nazareth” or any number of rather alarming You Tube clips, you’ll notice how shocked the other people are in the room and realize why most Mennonite ministers wouldn’t dwell very long if at all on this aspect of the scene.

But I think there’s something to be gained here by looking at the way in which Jesus receives the extraordinary love and lavish, even extravagant and sensual affection of Mary. There’s something to be gained in our own understanding of how we give to the One we love and who loves us and how much of ourselves and our resources we lavish on and in the name of the One who has redeemed us and how much we receive in return.

To get an idea of just how extravagant a gesture this was, the Rev. Dennis Sepper notes in his essay, “Extravagant Love,” that, “a day’s wage at the time of Jesus was one denarius, so Mary’s 300 denarii perfume would be worth almost an entire year’s wages.” According to the most recent U.S. Census Bureau the median household income in the U.S was just under \$52,000. “Now just imagine someone going out, buying a \$52,000 bottle of perfume and then pouring it over someone’s feet,” Rev. Sepper writes. “It just doesn’t make sense! It just isn’t right!”

And indeed, watching Mary break open a jar of perfume that costs far more than anyone in that room would have ever hoped to make selling fish, prompts at least one disciple to make a rather pointed remark...

[sing (from Jesus Christ, Superstar] Woman, your fine ointment, brand new and expensive, should have been saved for the poor. Why has it been wasted, it could have raised maybe 300 silver pieces or more. People who are hungry, people who are starving matter more than your feet and hair!”

Growing up the way I did and, I would imagine many of you did, that seems like a pretty reasonable reaction to what was taking place. Besides the uncomfortable display of extravagant sensuality, they as we wonder how it could possibly make sense to use something worth so much money on that which didn’t seem to be serving some worthy purpose. After all, don’t we hear Jesus

teaching over and over throughout his ministry to take care of the poor and watch over the widows and the orphans among us?

But Jesus shocks once again by telling Judas that the poor would always be around and that this moment of devotion, gratitude and love lavished was an important and beautiful one to be honored and respected.

“Why the extravagance?” Dr. Peter Woods writes in his essay on this passage, “There’s No Soul in Safety, Only Shadows.” “Is it not true that only when we have been helped by God, that we begin to understand how to live extravagantly in honoring Christ wherever we may find him?” [The sisters Mary and Martha who were overcome with gratitude at the raising of their brother from the dead] discovered that nothing was too much to offer in praise of God, after Jesus had restored their lives to them ([quite] literally because Lazarus’ death would have left them as women, destitute in that society). When Jesus has become the reason for our very existence, we have a different sense of values and what worth really means.”

Dr. Woods goes on to write about, “A dear friend and recovering alcoholic [who described] his journey into following Christ, not as some intellectual, or social pursuit. ‘Oh no’, he says ‘I had to find something that would give me a reason not to commit suicide at the end of every day.’ THAT is to know you have been helped by God.”

Where in your life do you lavish your love? Where in your life do you give gratitude for that which you have received and even for that which you know you WILL receive through the abundance of God and being part of God’s community?

Does Mary’s example of giving so much of herself and her resources without thought to what others would think of her inspire you to give out of what you’ve been given in lavishing your own love on God and God’s children?

“In Lent we remember the giving of God’s own self for us; [and] the absolute extravagance of that love is often humbling,” writes the Reverend Melissa Bane Sevier in her article, “The Spiritual Practice of Extravagance.”

“A woman brings an expensive perfume and pours it on Jesus’ feet in thanks for what he’d done for her family. The absolute extravagance of her gratitude is inspiring.

A stranger is hungry or thirsty, in need of shelter or clothing. “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor,” says God.

The poor you always have with you. Show them the same extravagant love you have just seen Mary express toward me, says Jesus.

Extravagance is the spiritual practice of doing something wild and amazing—even unexpected. It is how we express how God moves among us.”

“By this extravagant act, Mary introduces Jesus to anyone who still doesn’t know who he is,” writes Alyce McKenzie on “Edgy Exegesis.” “She hasn’t misunderstood his title or misread his résumé. She knows exactly who he is and the kind of honor he is due. He deserves an act of extravagant holiness. The smell of perfume amid the stench of betrayal, jealousy, and looming violence. A sweet moment of stillness amid a gathering storm. An outpouring of homage amid the onslaught of hatred.”

And perhaps this is what the moment is really all about. Another place along this long wilderness journey in Lent where we are asked to stop and pay attention to all that God is and to be grateful for not only what has been done for us but for the very fact that we are God’s children. And being loved so lavishly and so sensually, are we not to show our lavish love to God by lavishing our love on one another in return?

Long ago there lived an old woman who had a wish. She wished more than anything to see for herself the difference between heaven and hell. The monks in the temple agreed to grant her request. They put a blindfold around her eyes, and said, "First you shall see hell."

When the blindfold was removed, the old woman was standing at the entrance to a great dining hall. The hall was full of round tables, each piled high with the most delicious foods — meats, vegetables, fruits, breads, and desserts of all kinds! The smells that reached her nose were wonderful.

The old woman noticed that, in hell, there were people seated around those round tables. She saw that their bodies were thin, and their faces were gaunt, and creased with frustration. Each person held a spoon. The spoons must have been three feet long! They were so long that the people in hell could reach the food on those platters, but they could not get the food back to their mouths. As the old woman watched, she heard their hungry desperate cries. "I've seen enough," she cried. "Please let me see heaven."

And so again the blindfold was put around her eyes, and the old woman heard, "Now you shall see heaven." When the blindfold was removed, the old woman was confused. For there she stood again, at the entrance to a great dining hall, filled with round tables piled high with the same lavish feast. And again, she saw that there were people sitting just out of arm's reach of the food with those three-foot long spoons.

But as the old woman looked closer, she noticed that the people in heaven were plump and had rosy, happy faces. As she watched, a joyous sound of laughter filled the air.

And soon the old woman was laughing too, for now she understood the difference between heaven and hell for herself. The people in heaven were using those long spoons to feed each other.

Amen.