

SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk (Delivered on Sunday, April 3, 2022)

Text: **John 12:1-8** (*New Revised Standard Version*)

Intro: In Lent we remember the giving of God's own self for us. The absolute extravagance of that love is often humbling. In today's reading, a woman brings an expensive perfume and pours it on Jesus' feet in gratitude and honor. Today, we focus on that absolute extravagance and the meaning of such an anointing.

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."

Reflecting with Pastor Donald Shenk: ***"Reckless Abundance"***

For as long as I can remember, I've had, shall we say, a CHALLENGE with abundance, extravagance and what some might even call lavishness. Not so much with money, mind you, although that certainly factors in here, but with a feeling or an allowance of my spirit to accept the bounty God has for us and not in some way feel guilty about receiving it. I wonder if this strikes a chord for anyone out there.

Now some of this, undoubtedly, has to do with my upbringing and the Mennonite religion I was associated with which taught that one should do more with less and eschew any type of grasping after riches or getting caught up in the material world of things and what used to be called "filthy lucre." Mind you, this was my own interpretation of what I was hearing being taught, and I will certainly own that.

However, this interpretation of what was "RIGHT" in God's eyes and how we were supposed to live our lives here on earth, had a profound effect on every aspect of my life – not just in regard to money, but as regarded my own propensity to want beautiful things around me including clothes, nature, music and the visual arts. I always loved that which sparkled and danced before my eyes and I loved being surrounded by those things which aroused the senses, whether they be something that looked stunning, felt luxurious or smelled splendid.

But the culture I was raised in celebrated these things not at all, except for maybe music, although it had to be a particular kind of music – that kind of music which pointed one's

thoughts and desires only towards God and God alone. And I learned to absolutely love that kind of music and continue to luxuriate in it today, if you will.

But, deep within, I knew that for me there was something more. Something was missing from my experience with God and I began to search for it even as a young child. I knew that God was in the beauty of the natural world and beyond that to the whole universe. I could feel that God was in everything and that the most beautiful things on this earth and in the heavens above were created by God and could lead us to connect with God in ways that were beyond the muted tones and regulated displays that seemed to make up a huge part of my surroundings.

As an adult, I can absolutely appreciate the need to mitigate the very human desires for material things and the ephemeral objects of beauty, such as elegant clothing and opulent perfume since it is also very human to be controlled by our desires for such things and, as is shown often throughout the scriptures, be led away from our desire for God because of them.

But, as in our scripture story for today, one that unlike last week's Prodigal Son story, which was found only in Luke, is recorded in some form in all of the gospels, the seeming recklessness of using a whole bottle of very expensive perfume, called pure nard in today's reading, to wash Jesus' feet was praised by Jesus and criticized by his betrayer. I think that definitely says something right there.

Now I'm not saying, of course, that Jesus was lifting up Chanel, Shalimar or even Lancome as exemplars of virtue in the Christian life, but I am saying that Jesus was accepting of the beauty and the lavish love Mary's extravagant gift represented in her expression of devotion at a time and a place that required it – especially as Jesus was entering the most difficult time of his life that would lead him to his death on the cross only a little while later.

“This is a story of generosity and abundance despite Judas' framing of the action as frivolous and poor stewardship,” our UCC theologian, Rev. Dr. Cheryl Lindsay asserts. “Jesus rejects the scarcity framing as much as the hypocrisy. Eschewing abundance will not solve poverty. Embracing abundance and cultivating generosity eradicates poverty more than penny pinching hospitality and judging someone's gift giving. In this, the expansive use of the nard reminds us of the lushness of the garden and the abundance of creation.”

I love that! How often we can get caught up in thinking that we're to embrace scarcity and lack as hallmarks of God's kin-dom when it's really just the opposite. One only has to look at the phenomenal abundance and fecundity evident in creation to see that our God is about plenteousness and exuberance and wants all of God's children to be overflowing with goodness and bountiful life.

For it is within this generous and abundant view of God's universe that we are able to become the kind of sharing creatures God wants us to be. We are given to from God's abundance and we give out of that abundance - good measure, pressed down and shaken together and running over! Extravagantly!

“Lavish devotion contrasts critical stinginess,” writes commentator Matt Skinner. “This passage gives permission, so to speak, to honor Jesus in extravagant ways... It warns against mistaking discipline for discipleship. It embraces affection as part of a devotion to Jesus that is nothing less than the costly, precious gift of one’s whole self—down to every last strand of hair.”

Freeing ourselves to see the beauty in God’s creation and allowing that beauty to be used in the honoring of God is, well, a beautiful thing. Although there is much to be said about waste and profligacy, today’s story reminds us that there is a time to be economical and frugal and there’s a time to throw caution to the wind and rejoice extravagantly in the good our God has shown us.

“Barbara Brown Taylor says that Mary is prophetically witnessing to the extravagance, the lavishness of God's love and mercy, something Mary had experienced in Jesus himself, just as we can even today,” notes another UCC commentator, Kate Matthews. “Just as Jesus began his ministry with an extravagance of excellent wine at a wedding feast, so his ministry comes to a close here in an extravagance of expensive ointment, a passionate display of love and caring ... There's nothing stingy, [and] nothing miserly, about God's love.”

Amen? Amen!