

The Extravagant Disciple

John 12:1-8

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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." (NRSV)

This is a story of extravagance, of a woman named Mary who dumped very expensive perfume on someone's dirty feet and then promptly wiped it off. You might call this action absurd, wasteful, or outrageous. Jesus, however, calls it discipleship.

To understand why Mary was extravagant, look back to chapter 11. Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, died, and then was resuscitated by Jesus. As a way of thanking Jesus, the family had a party for him. Martha showed her gratitude to Jesus by bustling around the house getting the meal ready, while Mary sat at the feet of Jesus. The question Mary must have asked herself was: my sister Martha has such an obvious way to express gratitude. She's a fabulous cook. But that's not me. What can I do to show gratitude for having Lazarus back safe and sound?

Mary's solution was shocking. She took a pound of pure nard perfume worth 300 denarii, poured it on the feet of Jesus, and wiped it off with her hair. A denarius was the average daily wage for a worker, so the price of this perfume would represent 10 months' worth of wages. But this perfume may have cost Mary more than 10 months of wages. Most workers out in the marketplace who earned a denarius a day were male, not female. Therefore this perfume might have been even more costly to her. How long had she worked to buy it? For how many years had she saved until she had enough to buy it? That jar of perfume might have been the only savings account she had, the only investment she owned.

Moreover, she poured it all away at once. She did not use it as most people would, a little dab on the neck or arms, only for special occasions, conserving it to be used gradually

over many years. No. Mary uses all of it at once to wash the feet of Jesus. Her act was profligate, rash, even foolish.

Judas is scandalized. Why didn't she sell this perfume for 300 denarii and give the money to the poor? This sounds like a good argument. Judas sounds like a righteous Old Testament prophet who's trying to help the poor.

And then we find out that Judas is not as holy as he sounds, for Judas is a thief. His job is to keep the money bag for Jesus and his fellow disciples. But he has not been keeping it; he has been skimming it for his own personal use. Maybe Judas thought to himself: "300 denarii! Wow! I could take maybe 10% off the top. 30 denarii, a months wage—not bad! Oh, I wish I could have gotten my hands on that money!"

The meaning of Mary's extravagant act does not become clear until chapter 13. Only six days after this thank you party at Mary and Martha's, Jesus and the male disciples get together for the Passover meal. During the meal, Jesus took off his outer robe, tied a towel around himself, and washed the feet of the disciples!

A little bell should be ringing in your head. Just as Mary had lavishly bathed the feet of Jesus with that expensive perfume, so now is Jesus lavishly bathing the feet of the male disciples with water. I quote Jesus' words as he did this:

"Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do [to each other] as I have done to you."

Which roughly translated, means this: if you want an example of what it means to follow Jesus in discipleship, remember Mary. True discipleship is about faithfulness, yes, but it's also about extravagant praise to God, extravagant acts of service to fellow human beings. Don't be like Judas, who is trapped in his wilderness of lies, stealing, and selfishness. Instead, be like Mary: leave your wilderness and engage in absurd, wasteful, and outrageous acts in order to praise God; or be like Jesus, who extravagantly demonstrates Lordship by doing what slaves do.

Extravagance does not come easily to Mennonites. For most of the last 500 years, we have tended to be a thrifty, prudent people. We watch our money carefully, avoid lavish purchases, and spend only where we had a reasonable hope of return. Our behavior has been quiet, reserved, full of decorum. We would have looked at Mary and labeled her action to be not only irresponsibly wasteful, but also personally undignified. Mary has not always been a model of discipleship in the Mennonite Church. Mary is very nearly the opposite of the kind of serious, sober discipleship we have upheld as normative.

We have much to learn from Mary, but notice her extravagance is not lavished on herself. American culture pushes us to lavish extravagance on ourselves. Lavishing ourselves is not the gospel, and it's neither what Mary did in John 12 nor what Jesus did in John 13. Mary and Jesus are lavishing their extravagance on God, or on other people, not on themselves!

Notice also that Mary and Jesus' actions go beyond taking care of a neighbor's cat while they're away on vacation, or beyond dropping off a cherry pie to a friend in crisis. Those acts may be valuable expressions of your Christian faith; but they are not quite the kind of radical actions modeled here in John.

Extravagant discipleship is rooted in the extravagance of God. If you choose to live extravagantly for others, don't do it just because Mary poured expensive perfume on the feet of Jesus. Do it mainly because God in Christ is extravagant with you: extravagantly forgiving, extravagantly blessing, extravagantly loving. Be extravagant because God is.