

Text: John 12:1-11
Title: Extravagance
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Roger Allen Nelson

My daughter got married a year and a half ago. (Have I mentioned that she's pregnant?) Planning the wedding and reception was a long, deliberate, and delightful process. Sandi and Lauren have an impeccable sense of style, that doesn't come on the cheap....

And then there was navigating the expectations of the groom's family, and the ever-present reality that I'm an abject failure with money, and typically, when I raised a question or voiced some protest, Sandi's response was that we only have one daughter and we're only doing this once....

But, when the wedding arrived the day was glorious, the beauty was breathtaking, and the sunset over the reception was other-worldly and will never be forgotten. Family and friend talked and laughed and danced and tears of joy flowed with good food and drink and my wife and daughter were radiant and I was thankful for the extravagance.

Now, I've seen the same joy in church basements with ham-buns and jello-salad, and I know that weddings are functions of culture and family and finances and level-headedness, but in almost every setting there are splashes of extravagance. Expressions of joy and hope and gratitude that well up and spill over in ways that blow through the boundaries.

We ended the sermon last week with a party and we pick up this morning with a party. Our text this morning blows through the boundaries. Our text this morning is a moment of extravagance.

Lazarus had been dead for four days when Martha saw her brother stumble out of the grave still wrapped in the linens of the dead. She couldn't believe her eyes, but she smelled the oils that anointed the dead and the stink of decaying flesh and a whiff of something like spring. He was dead and but now he was alive....

Hallelujah!
Get out your best suit!
Polish up a ring!
Put on your dancing shoes!
Kill the fatted calf!
This calls for a resurrection dinner party!

So, Martha, an exceptional cook, got busy in the kitchen. There was little in this world that made her happier than family and friend gathered around the table. She poured love into every dish. This was the best way she knew to say thank-you.

Lazarus, still shaking off death's cobwebs, couldn't eat fast enough. Who knows how long you get after you've been dead once. For this second-go-round at life the bread and wine never tasted better.

Jesus was the honored guest. These were some of his best friends, but truth be told they really didn't know what to make of him. He was a friend, but he was also a teacher, hero, miracle worker, maybe messiah, and raiser-from-the-dead....

Around the table they told stories, gave toasts, savored each dish, and once in while they couldn't help but look at Lazarus and laugh in disbelief. It was like Jesus said in that parable about the prodigal son:

Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.

So, they ate and danced and sucked the life out of each moment. Because, truth be told, they were hemmed in by death and danger lurked in the shadows. In the murky-muddy-waters of church and state the Pharisees, chief priests, and Roman guard were plotting to kill Jesus and Lazarus. But, tonight they were alive and together!

Mary broke open an expensive bottle of oil and poured it over the cracked and calloused feet of Jesus. It was the best way that she knew to say thank you.

Let expense be damned.

Let danger be damned.

Let death be damned.

She loosened her hair ~ good Jewish women never let their hair down ~ and she began to wipe the oil over his feet with her tousled black mane. Before she could stop them, tears were mixing with the oil, and the room was full of the smells of food and perfume and feet and death. And, Mary didn't know if she was crying for joy or fear.

Dear friends, the story of a woman anointing Jesus with oil and/or tears is in every gospel. Depending on the gospel it's recorded at different times, at different places, and in different ways. For example, in the Gospel of Mark the woman pours it on his head.

Too often we get tripped up over the exchange with Judas about the poor and the expense of it all. (In Keith Starkenburg's fine reflection on this text he notes that in today's economy Mary was pouring \$15,000 on the feet of Jesus.) And, there is probably some imagery here of Jesus being anointed as messiah and a foreshadowing of his imminent death. But!

But, what is often lost in all that is the remarkable human moment of lovers in a dangerous time. For in a moment of gratitude for resurrection, or fear of coming crucifixion, Jesus and Mary let the extravagance of expensive perfume overwhelm the stink of death. Rather than run, or hide, or wilt, or rebel they looked death and resurrection in the face and Mary said thank you ~ the best way that she knew how. An act of extravagance.

Richard Lischer writes about a friend battling cancer:

She had already done two full courses of chemotherapy and through it all had managed to complete a doctoral dissertation. To celebrate she and her husband rented a VFW hall, hired a band, and threw a big party.

Then, two days before graduation her doctor confirmed that the cancer was back. Experimental treatments would begin the day after graduation. My guess was they would limp through the ceremony and cancel the party.

But, she had the party. And I tell you that I have never heard the gospel of God's "yes" preached more powerfully than I saw it danced on the floor of the VFW. An outsider would have only seen arthritic gyrations... but this was a woman of faith and she danced her "yes" in the grip of the "no." And that is the way we do it. The best celebrating is done in the face of the enemy; the best dancing is done on the devil's dance floor.

Dear friends, in the face of death, or terrorism, or heart disease, or mired in a confounding cultural war, or beat down by whatever it is that deadens the spirit, the gospel doesn't gloss over death or danger, nor does it offer some special protection or a secret way out.

Rather, the gospel proclaims a God who enters into death, who bears cancer, who knows disease, who suffers the torture of the state, and the terror of the mob. The stunning mystery of the gospel is that God doesn't side step death or sublimate death, but God goes through death, becomes death, tastes the bile of death, smells the stink of death, and yet rises up in resurrection. The extravagance is God's!

Theologian Marva Dawn wrote book entitled, "A Royal Waste Time: The Splendor of Worshipping God and being Church for the World." Part of what she suggests is that worship is disconnected from accomplishment. We are not striving to achieve something in worship, rather we give up our need for power, or production, or control. We make ourselves vulnerable and crack open all that we have to offer: our vulnerability, our brokenness, our very selves. An act of extravagance....

So, without being trite or flippant:

Hallelujah! Break open a bottle of perfume, pour out the best wine, slice the finest bread, dance on the devil's dance floor, and splash water over beautiful Joanna's head for she belongs, in life and death and resurrection to Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God.

Too pick up our preaching path through Lent....

Even as those who traverse a wilderness, we are gathered unto God as a mother hen gathers her chicks. And under that embrace let us tell the truth of who we are, using the time that we have to bring our whole selves to the hope of Easter morn. And no matter our story, no matter the truth we tell, God the Father runs towards us and all is forgiven.

Therefore, in the light of this joyful mystery let us blow through the boundaries and pour out our gratitude in extravagance.

Let us be extravagant in mercy,
let us be extravagant in worship,
let us be extravagant in service,
let us be extravagant in forgiveness,
let us be extravagant in love.

Our hope is in the resurrection.

Amen.