

SERMON: Gains and Losses

TEXT: John 12:1-8          Philippians 3:4b-14

It was extravagant. Generous beyond reason. Overflowing. Over-abundant. Over-the-top. Completely impractical. Frivolous. Excessive. Effusive. Radical. Bold. Uninhibited. Entirely un-lady-like.

“Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair.”

Costly is an understatement. The cost of this perfume was the equivalent of an entire year’s wages for one person. And Mary poured all of it out. All at once. All on one person.

On the other hand, what Jesus had done for her was equally generous and extravagant. He raised her brother, Lazarus, from the dead.

What would you give, after suffering the loss of a loved one, if that person’s life was restored?

Jesus was like another sibling to Mary and Martha and Lazarus. He was family to them. He had stayed at their home. He had shared meals with them. He calmed the storm of jealousy and sibling rivalry between Mary and Martha. He was with the sisters in their grief after Lazarus died. He felt the pain of that loss as well, and wept at the death of his close friend, his brother. And even though Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days, and even though Martha warned him of the stench, Jesus called Lazarus out of his tomb to return to his family, to live again.

Mary obviously felt a deep, spiritual connection with Jesus, and she seemed to understand better than all the other disciples, that his life would soon be coming to an end. Through all of her GAINS AND LOSSES, Jesus was there with Mary. He had become everything to her, and now she was about to lose him.

He was everything. But so much more than the kind of *everything* that is described in sentimental ballads and love poems and romantic movies. All the things that we would say and believe about our soulmate or our partner or the Prince or Princess Charming that we're still waiting for. No one can complete us or inspire us or fulfill us or save us like Jesus.

Jesus was Mary's Savior. He was the one who brought true meaning to her life. The one who allowed her to be who she was meant to be. The one who gave her life in so many ways.

So for Mary, no amount of money or expensive gifts or time sitting at his feet would ever be enough to show Jesus how much he meant to her.

Another pastor explained the scene: "Mary's recognized the rarity of the moment. She did not fail to seize the opportunity to show her commitment to the One who raised her brother from the dead and promised Martha he was the resurrection and the life. Mary knew all too well the pain of loss inherent in such radical newness; burial proceeds new life and that time in between feels eternal. Even confident of the promise of what's coming, we mourn the loss of what was. We cannot help but consider and remember the things of old when we're waiting for what lies ahead to be revealed. Mary's loving ritual honors the past, present, and future as she remembers what Jesus has done for her, attends to him right in front of her and anticipates the painful, extravagant, loving, new thing on the horizon." (Jill Duffield, *Looking Into the Lectionary: Hold Nothing Back*, The Presbyterian Outlook, April 1, 2019)

She also points out that all three of the texts in the lectionary for today “contain over-the-top sentiments. [Isaiah writes that] rivers will rush through the desert. Wild beasts will worship God. God makes a way even through the ocean. Paul [tells the church at Philippi] that absolutely everything he has ever had, as valuable as he once thought it was, he now sees as garbage, rubbish, dung. Whatever gain, advantage, or accomplishment, none of these things matter in the wake of being found by Jesus.” (Jill Duffield, *Looking Into the Lectionary: Hold Nothing Back*, The Presbyterian Outlook, April 1, 2019)

Judas makes a fair point about the poor – that the expense of Mary’s extravagance could have been used to help them – though his motivations are impure. John tells us, parenthetically, but very clearly, “[John] 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 answers him (and everyone else thinking the same thing), “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.”

This statement has been causing confusion and controversy in the church since its beginning. It has been used to justify as well as to condemn complacency regarding the poor. Scholars have pointed out, however, that Jesus was quoting from Deuteronomy 15:11. “For the poor will never cease out of the land; therefore I command you, you shall open wide your hand...to the needy and to the poor in the land.”

One theologian said that Jesus represents the poor. “The poor that we always have with us is Jesus. It is to the poor that all extravagance is to be given.” (Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, p. 215) This argument is supported by the words of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew (25:35-40), “Just as you [fed the hungry, clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger, visited the prisoner]..., you did it to me.”

Any extravagance, whether by Mary in her anointing of Jesus or by the church in serving the poor, pales in comparison to the gift that Jesus gives to all people of all times and places. The gift of his life.

The Apostle Paul understood this, as indicated in his letter to the Philippians. After enumerating all the reasons for his righteousness under the law, he said, “Yet, whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.

More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”

Nothing is more valuable, Paul argues. Nothing. Because, as he wrote to the Romans, “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

The love of God in Christ is our eternal gain that can never be taken away from us, can never pass away, can never be overturned or destroyed or undone. The sacrifice has been made, once and for all. The gift has been given. And we are invited to receive this assurance once again at the Table of our Lord.

Come, to receive his body and blood. Come to be nurtured, renewed, and strengthened in your faith. And may we never count the cost and never lose our passion for loving and serving him as we love and serve the least of these... to the glory of God!

AMEN.