

Fifth Sunday in Lent
Philippians 3:4b-14; Psalm 126; John 12:1-8
March 21, 2010
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I am always amazed by people who can give gifts not because it's your birthday or Christmas, but because they saw something in a store that reminded them of you and just had to get it. The last gift I received like that was a "Life is Good" long-sleeved shirt with a guitar player on the front. Similarly, before my bike trip a few years ago, I received a "Life is Good" T-shirt with a sleeping bag beside a campfire pictured on the front. Under it is written "Bed & Breakfast."

I especially treasure those sorts of gifts because they were given for no particular reason. The people didn't have to buy them, but the particular item made them think of me at a time when they were probably shopping for other reasons. Such gifts are signs of a special fondness.

I wish I could be more spontaneous with my generosity. I'm a bit ashamed to say I see more of Judas in me than Mary. My giving is more calculated, focused and pre-determined. I'm more generous with the poor that I don't know than the better-off people I know, such as family and friends, even Juanita. I'm not a thief, but I might think money spent on luxuries or non-necessities is misplaced.

In this bad economy, we're all probably more careful about our spending as we should be. Yet here, in our gospel, John tells us, Mary poured a pound of costly perfume on Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair. If, as Judas says, the perfume is worth 300 denarii or an average worker's yearly wages, that's an expensive massage. Is there a time and a place to be extravagant? Of course. Knowing when and how to be is the question. Is Mary justified?

One chapter earlier in John's gospel we're introduced to Martha and Mary and Lazarus when we read that "a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany..." (11:1) He would go on to die and be buried. Jesus is summoned because, John writes, "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus." (11:5)

Jesus already has a close association with the siblings well before he raises Lazarus after four days in the grave. Imagine Mary's admiration and appreciation for the man who brought her brother back from the grave. What is a life worth? Is any amount too much? What would we give to bring a loved one back?

Mary's gift lavished on Jesus is outrageously extravagant but not imprudent or frivolous. Jesus is worthy of such an expensive gesture.

In a lovely short story by O'Henry titled "The Gift of the Magi," a young American couple, Della and Jim, were very poor yet very much in love. Della's unique possession was her glorious long hair which, when let down, was like a robe. Jim had a treasured,

gold watch, which had been his father's. On Christmas Eve when Jim arrived home, Della gave him a platinum watch chain, which she had bought with the \$20 she received for selling her hair. Jim was caught off guard by Della's shorn head, but found her lovely nonetheless. Slowly, he handed her his gift, which was a set of expensive tortoise-shell combs with jeweled edges for her long, magnificent hair. He had sold his watch to buy them. Real love knows no bounds. Mary's love for Jesus was of that nature.

In John's gospel, Mary's gift intentionally prefigures an even greater act of generosity. The author of John's gospel, as we've seen many times previously, never misses an opportunity to disclose more than meets the eye. Something holy and eternal is unfolding beneath the surface for those who believe. Here the author uses Mary's unbridled outpouring of precious nard to anticipate Jesus' death and burial in one week. Mary is giving expensive perfume; Jesus will offer his very lifeblood for the love of humankind. Jesus' gift of himself, given even unto death on a cross, makes Mary's perfume mere spices and ointments for burial rites.

St. Paul responded to Jesus' life, death and resurrection with a different sort of appreciation and admiration. He refused to cling to his distinguished titles, degrees and accomplishments. In his letter to the Philippians, he lists them:

He is:

1. A card-carrying member of the people of Israel
2. Born into the faith and not a convert.
3. From the elite tribe of Benjamin – the aristocracy, if you will.
4. "A Hebrew born of Hebrews" meaning he was a pureblood who spoke Hebrew as well as Greek.
5. A Pharisee – one of only about 6,000 Jews that rigorously devoted themselves to every detail of the Law. He was of Olympian, gold-medal character. His heart burned to protect Judaism from opponents. He was consumed by zeal for God's ways.
6. Lastly, he was considered even by his peers as Number One in the class of Jewish greats – "under the law, blameless."

Paul had every reason to boast and was undoubtedly revered for the circumstances of his birth, pedigree, exceptional education, total dedication and enormous effort to be the best Jew possible. In spite of all this, he writes, "Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ...and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him..."

Loss, rubbish, a distinguished life, worthy of honor discarded. Something truly other-worldly guides Paul's trajectory in life. We know it began with a blinding flash and voice from heaven, which knocked him to the ground, "Saul, Saul why do you persecute me? I am Jesus..."

Saul, who would become Paul, knew enough to listen and take heed, and his life changed forever. From then on, Paul lived entirely from a center of gratitude for the blessings that were his in Christ Jesus.

Mary before him, now Paul, and even Jesus most of all, I would suggest, give us the example of living from a place of plenty. God's grace is always sufficient. Riches abound for those who have put their faith in God and found this world's promises and treasures bankrupt.

I am convinced the way to a satisfying life is through living each day and moment with gratitude. Unfortunately, our culture of entitlement – “I deserve this or I perpetually have a right to that” – can keep us dissatisfied, wanting more and blind to the simple gifts that are always ours from a God who gives and gives without ceasing.

Earlier we prayed that “our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found.” May that prayer be more and more answered in all our lives so our giving of praise to God and love to neighbor may be extravagant. Amen.