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Give Extravagantly

“While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.” (Mark 14:3)

The word “extravagant” is defined as “exceeding the limits of reason or necessity; spending much more than is necessary” (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary). It is not a word that our world is unfamiliar with when it comes to lifestyle. However, in regard to giving, more times than not we are encouraged from our youth to practice moderation. Jesus’ view is a bit different.

While Jesus is dining with Simon in his house, a woman enters and breaks open a jar of very expensive perfume—worth one year’s wages! In today’s standards that would equal, on average, \$15,000–\$20,000! Extravagant giving at its best (or at its worst, depending on your point of view). Some of those watching could not believe this and became indignant. What a waste. Could it not have been used for the poor?

Apparently this was the final straw for Judas. Immediately after this, he would go to the chief priests to arrange the betrayal of Jesus. Jesus’ reaction, however, is interesting, to say the least:

“Leave her alone . . . Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her” (Mark 14:6-9).

Two things make her gift memorable. First, while I am not an expert in the perfume department, I do know that expensive perfume is powerful. It doesn’t take a lot to fill a room with its fragrance. An entire bottle of it poured out at one time on one person—can you imagine!? Not only would it be overpowering, but wouldn’t it linger with Jesus for days—on Him and on His clothes? Throughout the days of “Holy Week,” wherever He went, would people have been able to smell the fragrance on Him? Memorable, to say the least. Days later, I wonder if Jesus could still smell that fragrance and be reminded of this woman’s act of love?

The second thing that makes her gift memorable is that Jesus lifts up her gift as an ongoing memorial:

“I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her” (v. 9).

It was a sure thing that her act of love and sacrifice would be recorded in Scripture when the Master Himself said that it would be remembered wherever the Gospel is preached.

What is it about her gift that touched Jesus? What makes her giving so memorable? It’s fragrance, yes. Smells have a powerful way of remaining with us. But even more memorable than the fragrance was its extravagance. A year’s wages—it is a gift that seems to exceed the limits of reason or necessity—at least for most, Jesus excluded. Jesus understood that deeper than

the extravagance of money spent was the extravagance of love being poured out by this woman upon Him. She held nothing back. She came to break open her jar and empty all of its contents. The Bible is silent as to her motive. Had she heard Jesus teach? Had she witnessed His miracles? One can only guess. But in her act she not only prepares Him for His burial, she gives witness to a more extravagant love than her own.

Jesus came into the world and into our lives in order to break open His own “alabaster jar”—the jar of His own body. He held nothing back. The lifeblood of the Son of God was spilled out. No wages—not even a lifetime of wages—can match or pay for the cost of that sacrifice.

When one has tasted of the extravagant love of Christ that is poured out for us on the Cross and given to us in the Body and the Blood of the Sacrament, the desire created within us by the Spirit is to offer it to others in return. Our lives are then marked and remembered for offering the fragrance of His extravagant love.

Each of us has an alabaster jar. Our lives and our bodies are those vessels that contain the precious treasures that God entrusts to us. Those treasures are our talents and abilities. These are our possessions as well as material blessings—these reflect who we are as created individuals.

Do you ever get the feeling, though, that so much of life is spent in conserving and playing it safe? Instead of pouring out our contents, we carefully distribute what we have, a little here and a little there. At the Cross, however, we are faced with the outpouring of God’s extravagant love. The question that remains in response is where in our life are we willing to break open our jar and spill out its contents in an act of extravagant love? Such an act makes us vulnerable to criticism and misunderstanding. Jesus and the woman with the alabaster jar understand this all too well.

C.S. Lewis has helpful words in this regard (p. 169):

“To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable . . . The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers . . . of love is Hell.”

When I look at the account of the early church in the book of The Acts of the Apostles, the picture I see is one of extravagant love being poured out. Those who witnessed the life and death and resurrection of Jesus held nothing back. Time, property, wealth, and even life were not held back as they poured out themselves as mission responders to what they had been given by Jesus.

In what ways is Jesus calling you to open the alabaster jar of your life and pour out its contents as a gift of extravagant love?

Prayer: Father, you have poured out your love for me in extravagant ways. Every day my heart is overwhelmed by your generosity and grace. Nowhere, though, do I see the extravagance of your love more than at the Cross of your own dear Son. You have purchased me, not with gold or silver, but with His precious body and blood. How can I begin to thank you and express my love to you? My soul praises you and you alone. No one loves me as you love me. I only ask that in my life I might have the opportunity to pour out my love in extravagant ways for you in return. **Amen.**

Challenge: By means of some extravagant act or gift, find someone with whom you can express the love that Jesus has poured out on you.

Scripture Reading: Mark 14

From the Book of Concord: I believe in the Holy Spirit, one holy Christian church, the community of the saints, forgiveness of sins, resurrection of the flesh, and eternal life. Amen.

What is this? Answer:

“I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my LORD or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith. Daily in this Christian church the Holy Spirit abundantly forgives all sins—mine and those of all believers. On the Last Day the Holy Spirit will raise me and all the dead and will give to me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true” (The Small Catechism, The Third Article of The Creed, p. 355.5-6).