

Homily – Extravagant Generosity (based on an essay by Dan Clendenin)

Rob Keim

April 6, 2025 – St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church, Arroyo Grande

A few years ago years ago I accompanied my husband, Jeff, to the Episcopal Church's General Convention in Indianapolis. Jeff was part of our Diocesan deputation, and I was the groupie. I had no official responsibilities but seemed to become the group's wine steward.

There is a very nice wine shop in downtown Indianapolis that is known for its vast inventory and helpful staff. Most of their wine is priced for average consumers like me. But some of it is meant for connoisseurs and collectors. Some of it is outrageously expensive.

There is was a 1928 D'YQUEM SAUTERNES for \$4300 a bottle or \$49,000 per case.

I can pretty easily guess what my husband would have said if I bought this expensive bottle of wine, brought it home, and drank it with a friend who only had a week to live. Jeff is a pretty good person, but he would still respond like any normal person. Which means we would have something new to talk about with our marriage counselor. Spending this much on wine is not an extravagance that would be easily accepted.

Now, today as we prepare for Palm Sunday next week we have a story of extravagance. The Gospel of John shows Mary anointing Jesus with perfume that costs what most people would make in a whole year.

Ten chapters earlier in this same Gospel of John we saw Jesus in another story of extravagance. In his first miracle or "sign" Jesus created the equivalent of 600 bottles of the best wine for a wedding in Cana. This is not just water into wine, but water into lots and lots of really good wine.

In the former story Mary demonstrates extravagant generosity towards Jesus and in the latter story we have Jesus sharing extravagance with those at the wedding. As we join these two stories together we are reminded that extravagance can move two ways and it is reciprocal. It is both given and received between God and God's people. Sometimes God is the giver and sometimes we give to God. This exchange of reckless abundance is what it is like to be in healthy relationship with God.

Now, this message of extravagance may seem like an odd message during the season of Lent, but it is not.

During the last two weeks of his life, Jesus stayed in Bethany, about two miles from Jerusalem. At dinner to honor Jesus, Mary poured extravagantly expensive perfume on Jesus' feet. And, after pouring the perfume, Mary wiped Jesus feet with her hair. The aroma filled the house.

This is one of the few stories that is found in all four of the Gospels, and Bible historians have decided that this perfume was pure nard imported from India.

Now, today's Gospel story is full of many things that confront the social norms of two thousand years ago. This dinner to honor Jesus ends with arguments going against the norms of hospitality. A woman lies down beside Jesus going against the norms that physically separated men and women. And, she lets down her hair and then caresses Jesus' feet. It is easy for us to see the absurdity of Mary's actions.

Now, in John's version of this story it is Judas who is indignant, and in the other Gospels it is all the Disciples who were upset. They feel it is an incredible waste, and instead, the money could have been given to the poor.

After three years with Jesus, the Disciples have learned the lesson of caring for the poor. Caring for the poor is a message that still resonates with us. We get it. For many of us, care of the poor is what characterizes the followers of Jesus, and it is a central ministry for us here in the Episcopal Church. However, this story of extravagantly expensive perfume seems to say that care of the poor is not the apex of Christian spirituality. Yes, believe it or not, I said something is more important than ministry to the poor. There is something else that is needed to better aim us into right relationship with God. And, here is what is more important.

As this story points out, we are called to give ourselves to God without restraint. We are called to give all that we have and all that we are to God. This type of extravagance reminds me of the poor widow who gave her few coins, even though it was all that she had. You may remember that her giving was much more than the monies given by the wealthy.

During this season of Lent, we are called to practice extravagant generosity. We are called to practice so that maybe, just maybe, this is a new habit that will stick around for the rest of the year.

Now, I am not saying that we must give all to the Church. I have no trouble if you decide to double or triple your pledge to St. Barnabas, but I think we all recognize that loving God's church and loving God are two different things.

And, I'm also not saying that generosity is only about money. Extravagant generosity is so much more than wealth. As we see in today's story, Mary is making an extreme act of personal devotion towards God. She is making an extravagant offering to God.

And, that is what we do in Lent as we prepare ourselves for Holy Week. We practice giving our whole selves to God, and as we give ourselves to God we better realize that God is embracing us with unlimited love and grace.

So, we practice giving ourselves to God, body, mind, and spirit. We practice giving our possessions, our expectations, and our loved ones to God. Now, let me digress for just a moment to explain what I mean by giving our loved ones to God. Many of us try to fix or manage our loved ones so that they can do things the way we think they ought to do them. However instead, we are to let go of managing our loved ones. Give them over to God and feel the freedom that comes from that. We are to unrestrainedly give our old selves to God, and in return we see that God is already pouring out love on us as well.

No, I am not saying that God gives us what we want if we do the right thing. We don't get a Cadillac in the driveway if we are good enough. That is the false prosperity gospel. It may seem like America embodies the prosperity gospel, but that is a spiritual dead end.

Instead, we are to give our old selves to God so that we can be formed and shaped by God's unlimited love. We can be molded into something better, something more, something wonderful.

As today's Psalm says *"those who sowed with tears will reap with songs of joy."*

In today's reading from the prophet Isaiah, *"Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing."*

This is a season in which we practice extravagant generosity. We give it all to God, so that through Christ and with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit we can trade up to a new and wonderful self. And one of the amazing things about that new self is that you make time for the poor, and the orphan and the widow, and the ill, and the lonely, and the sinners. The new self pays attention to those that are often marginalized by society.

Let me end today with a poem by Maya Angelou called "Touched by an Angel".

We, unaccustomed to courage
exiles from delight

live coiled in shells of loneliness
until love leaves its high holy temple
and comes into our sight
to liberate us into life.

Love arrives
and in its train come ecstasies
old memories of pleasure
ancient histories of pain.
Yet if we are bold,
love strikes away the chains of fear
from our souls.

We are weaned from our timidity
In the flush of love's light
we dare be brave
And suddenly we see
that love costs all we are
and will ever be.
Yet it is only love
which sets us free.