

*A Terrible Gift*

John 12:1-8

Whitefish UMC

March 21, 2010

- † What makes you love someone? We don't know why Jesus loved Lazarus, and his sisters Martha and Mary. Maybe it was because Jesus could be a man with them, as well as a Messiah.
- † But John's gospel tells us that it's true. Jesus loved Lazarus and his sisters so much that he was willing to risk his safety to return from across the river when Martha sent word that Lazarus was deathly ill.
- † "Lord, he whom you love is ill," the message from the sisters read. So against the advice of everyone who had common sense, Jesus had come to them, even though he knew it would be too late. Lazarus was so dead that the scripture says he stank, so dead that Jesus stood in front of his tomb and wept and yelled in fury at his death.
- † Not knowing whether they should run away in fear or stay rooted to the spot, the sisters were amazed when their brother emerged stumbling from the tomb, trailing his shroud like a discarded cocoon.
- † Understandably word of what happened spread like wildfire among the people. Healing the sick and casting out demons were one thing, but bringing some one back to life after being dead for four days was another thing altogether. With the raising of Lazarus, Jesus went from being just a nuisance to the authorities to a serious threat to their control.

- † As the Passover approaches in just six days, there is no way that Pilate will ignore this leader of a possible insurrection. Jesus' days are numbered, and he knows it full well. So he heads to Bethany and his friends' home—the only place close to a home that he had as an adult—and there his friends and disciples gather around him, to take care of him and thank him with a good meal.
- † When the supper is ready, everyone reclines around the table, Jesus near Lazarus, who is unaware that a trade has occurred. By returning from across the river where he was safe, beyond the reach of his enemies, Jesus has traded his life for his friend's (and he would say more about that later). Strange indeed that the recently deceased Lazarus of Bethany will outlive the Messiah Jesus of Nazareth.
- † While everyone else is eating, Mary slips away and returns holding a clay jar. Without saying anything, she kneels at Jesus' feet and breaks the jar's neck. The smell of spikenard fills the room—a sharp scent halfway between mint and ginseng. And then she astonishes everyone in the room by doing four outlandish things in a row.
- † In our time, it doesn't seem so outrageous, but for Mary, a single woman, and Jesus, an unmarried man, what happened next startled everyone present. First, she lets down her hair in a room full of men, which an honorable woman would never do. Then she pours this very expensive perfume on Jesus' feet, which is also not acceptable. People would anoint the head of someone—perhaps a king—but not the feet.
- † Then she touches Jesus—a single woman rubbing a single man's feet—never done even among friends. Finally, she wipes the perfume off with her hair—an outrageously intimate act without precedent in even this circle of people, grown accustomed to the crossing of boundaries as they are.

- † Now some version of this story is told in each of the four gospels, but the details and the woman in question are different. Only in John’s gospel does she have a name and an existing relationship with Jesus. So we already know that Mary of Bethany loves Jesus—remember the story about her sitting at his feet despite her sister’s anger? And we know that Jesus loves her and her brother and sister enough to return to them despite the danger to him.
- † So why this open demonstration, this strange pantomime, in front of all their friends? It’s extravagant, excessive, outlandish—as Judas is quick to point out. “Why wasn’t this perfume sold for a whole lot of money and given to the poor?” Judas asks scornfully, and for once he is making some sense, right?
- † Now a lot has been written about just how valuable this jar of spikenard would have been. The cost of it could have fed a peasant family for a year. Mary Gordon writes that she once read that the Roman poet Horace offered a whole barrel of his best wine to the poet Virgil in exchange for a small phial of nard.
- † Despite the fact that Judas’ objection seems valid in light of Jesus’ constant ministry to the poor, Jesus brushes the complaint aside, suddenly offering another take on the situation at hand. We tend to look at the scene as an either/or possibility. But Jesus says that caring for the poor is important, and so is what Mary is conveying with her actions. More of a “both/and” than an “either/or.”
- † “Leave her alone. Leave me alone. Just this once, let her look after me, because my time is running out. She’s trying to tell and show you something. Watch and listen and learn.”

- † As Barbara Brown Taylor says, “Whatever Mary thought about what she did, and whatever anyone else in the room thought about it, Jesus took it as a message from God—not the hysteric ministrations of an old maid gone sweetly mad but the carefully performed act of a prophet.
- † Everything around Mary smacked of significance—Judas, the betrayer, challenging her act; the flask of nard—wasn’t it left over from Lazarus’ funeral?—and out in the yard, a freshly vacated tomb that still smelled of burial spices, waiting for a new occupant. The air was dense with death, and while there may at first have been some doubt about whose death it was, Mary’s prophetic act revealed the truth.”
- † Lazarus’ death had just been the rehearsal, you see. It had been what might be called a terrible gift. Kay Lynn Northcutt wrote a poignant article in the recent *Christian Century*. When she was a young woman and her best friend had died of lung cancer, her minister told her: “You’ve been given a terrible gift at so young an age, Kay. A terrible gift.”
- † She says that the two-word phrase, “terrible gift” functions as a parable for her. The Greek word for parable means to throw down beside something. Jesus used parables as ways to startle people into thinking and living in new ways. The words “terrible” and “gift” aren’t usually used together. But that’s what this story of Lazarus does, what Lent does in an even broader sense. Through it we practice dying. We learn living—how to live.
- † Many of us have had the terrible gift of being with someone we love who is dying. Northcutt writes that when her mother’s dying began in earnest, she would call from her bed, “Girls!” Her sister and she would come running, “What Momma?”
- † “You’ve got to do something about all these children playing under my bed,” her mother exclaimed. Now this had happened before so Kay and her

sister had a plan. “Mom, you’re having another hallucination.” She lay quietly. “Right,” their mother said, “It’s a hallucination. I’m dying,” their mother said patiently to them, as if she and her sister were a couple of slow-witted children.

- † “But could you please take all these children out from underneath my bed and outside to play? They need sunlight and fresh air. Give them a good lunch. You and your sister take good care of them. I just love having them but I am too tired.” And then Kay and her sister bent down on either side of the bed and gently shooed the imaginary children out from under the bed.
- † As they opened the door to the backyard, their mother called out “Thank you, girls!” Kay and her sister didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, and they did both. Their mother’s death was physically very painful and hard.
- † But in her death, their mother, who spent her life caring for children as an early childhood educator, was herself cared for—and kept company by—children. In the last 21 days of her life, their mother whispered to them about “the most darling little boy” who was holding her hand.
- † “We die the way we lived,” Kay Northcutt writes, and that is the gift of Lent, and of this story about Mary and her extravagant love for Jesus. Lent gives us an opportunity to reflect on living and dying, and to decide what we want to live for and how to change so that it can happen.
- † Lazarus’ death and Mary’s great love prepare us for the events of Holy Week and Easter. As Barbara Brown Taylor says so beautifully: “When Mary stood before Jesus with that pound of pure nard in her hand, it could have gone either way. She could have anointed his head and everyone there would have proclaimed him king. But she did not do that. When she moved toward him, she dropped to her knees instead and poured the perfume on his feet, which could only mean one thing.

- † The only man who got his feet anointed was a dead man, and Jesus knew it. ‘Leave her alone,’ he said to those who would have prevented her. ‘Let her finish delivering the message.’”
- † Mary’s act was so lavish that it reminds us that there will be nothing economical about Jesus’ death, just as there was nothing stingy about his life. In him, the extravagance of God’s love is made flesh. In him, the excessiveness of God’s mercy is made real.
- † The bottle of Jesus’ love will not be saved. It will instead be opened, offered, and used, at great price. It will be raised up and poured out for the life of world, emptied to the last drop. Before that happens, Jesus will gather his friends together again for one last time at the Last Supper.
- † And Jesus will do something almost as unheard of as what Mary does—he will undress, tie a towel around his waist, and wash his disciples’ feet, despite their objections. Then he will give them a new commandment—love one another, as I have loved you.
- † Judas will enter the picture again, and Peter will argue with Jesus about the appropriateness of the occasion, but Jesus will push the objections aside so that he can convey his message about what love looks like.
- † Jesus and his friend Mary teach us about living and dying in this story and in the one to come in Holy Week. The question is, how will we use this terrible gift? Will we cast it off as just another idle tale about a woman who seems to have lost her wits and sense, about a love that only God can understand?
- † Or will we use it as a reminder that whatever we need from Jesus, there will be more than enough to go around. Whatever we spend to follow him, there will be plenty left over where he is concerned. There is no reason to fear running out of Jesus’ extravagant love.

- † For where God is concerned, there is always more than we can ask or imagine—gifts from our lavish, lavish Lord.
- † Won't you use this terrible gift as a way to practice living for justice and kindness and mercy, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Sources:

Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Prophet Mary," <http://day1.org>

Mary Gordon, Reading Jesus, 2009.

Kay Lynn Northcutt, "Lent's Terrible Gift," *Christian Century*, March 9, 2010.