



## EXTRAVAGANT FAITH

April 7, 2019, Fifth Sunday in Lent

John 12:1-18

Kimberly L. Clayton, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

---

My brother and I texted a couple of weeks ago, each of us feeling a bit wistful about our parents. He, wondering if Mom and Dad would be proud of the two albums he has self-produced in the last few years...me, remarking that I often think they would love to see Brick Church and pieces of their furniture that fit so beautifully in the manse here. And oh, how they would have loved seeing our sister, the youngest of their three children, officiate at a grandchild's wedding last summer. Whenever we siblings get together, no matter our age, it is amazing how each of us falls into well-worn family roles, our varying personalities and birth-order-impact still visible after all these years. Jeff, the oldest, confident and extroverted...Susan, the baby of the family, compassionate and intuitive...me, the well-adjusted middle child...

Such family dynamics play out at the dinner party at Mary, Martha and Lazarus' house in Bethany. We get to know this family across two gospels and three home visits. Of the three siblings, Lazarus is a bit of a mystery. We meet Mary and Martha in Luke 10, but Lazarus was either out of town on business or is so introverted no one even notices him because his name never comes up. In Luke, clearly Martha is the older of the two sisters. She is so responsible as to be annoying, bustling around in charge of the kitchen and the dinner table. She really doesn't want any help—Mary's not domestically inclined anyway—but then she complains that she has to do everything. It's a no-win situation, that's how it always goes in this family. Mary, obviously younger than Martha, is the sensitive one, loving and intuitive, she sits listening to Jesus talk.



John's Gospel gives us two more opportunities to get to know this family. All of chapter 11 is about them. Here, Lazarus is still the silent type...but that is because he is dead. Martha bustles out to properly meet Jesus, fusses at him for not arriving sooner, remains outspoken in her faith. She worries about the public stench of death when Jesus orders Lazarus' tombstone removed. She fetches Mary, who is at home weeping in grief. It's Mary's tears that open Jesus' tears, too. Sensitive, loving as ever...all three family stories note that Mary is always found at Jesus' feet. Every time. So, by John 12, we know them. We are hardly surprised that even at a dinner to celebrate his being raised from the dead, for God's sake, Lazarus never utters a word. Nor are we surprised that Martha serves. Or by Mary's extravagant outpouring of love. Judas, too, behaves according to type.

What is this story really about? Located at the close of Jesus' many "signs" in the Gospel of John, signs showing us who he is and what he has come to do, this biggest and last of sign all, raising Lazarus, closes chapter 11. What lies ahead are the protracted events leading to Jesus' suffering and death. So this dinner party, in the company of dear friends, is a kindness, it is a feast; it is a bridge between the two halves of the Gospel of John. It is the moment when Jesus himself is cared for, shown love in an extravagant, intimate way, and it comes just when needed most.

We always have so many people and things demanding our time and attention, our resources and efforts...but every now and then a moment comes that is singular in its necessity and its timing...an opportunity presents itself to do something now because it is needful now. There is this moment and no other when we may offer love or show a kindness or share a resource, and the cost of it is the last thing on our mind because it is simply the right, the only thing really, to do. So Mary pours out the purest perfume, and with it the purest love, anointing Jesus' feet because she sees that death is very near.

Her tender act brought to mind the story told at the funeral of President George H. W. Bush back in December. One of the President's closest friends, former Secretary of State, James Baker, came to check on him in that last day. Though he was mostly sleeping now, when Mr. Baker arrived, the President's eyes opened, "Where are we going, Bake?" he asked the man he loved like a younger brother.



“We’re going to heaven,” Mr. Baker answered. “That’s where I want to go,” Mr. Bush said. In the homily at the National Cathedral, Bush’s priest recalled that the Bakers came by the Bush home again after dinner out, knowing the end was near. Mr. Baker sat at the end of the bed and took Mr. Bush’s feet in his hands and rubbed and stroked them for over a half an hour. The priest said, “Here, I witnessed a world leader who was serving a servant who had been our world’s leader. ... What came to mind,” he continued, “was Jesus on that last night before his crucifixion, having said everything there was to say, he wrapped a towel around his waist and, without words, washed his disciples’ feet. And as he finished, he said, ‘I have set an example for you. You should do as I have done...’” As he told of Jim Baker rubbing the President’s feet, the camera focused on Baker, breaking with emotion as his wife, Susan, took his hand.

Some biblical scholars say that what Mary does for Jesus in this story models before it happens what Jesus will do in that upper room days later. The same verb that describes Mary ‘wiping’ Jesus’ feet with her hair is used again to describe Jesus wiping his disciples’ feet with a towel.<sup>i</sup>

Mary recognized the God-appointed moment before her to do good now because it was most needed now. Her love poured out extravagantly, generously, without counting or measuring the cost. John notes that the fragrance from her act of faithfulness filled the whole house. In early Church writings, the fragrance was said to have wafted out of the doors, through the streets, encompassing the whole world.<sup>ii</sup>

This story models for us discipleship at its most faithful and heartfelt best. The focus is clearly on Mary. But we should not pass over Martha too quickly. Like Luke, John tells us that Martha “served.” In Luke’s telling, Martha’s serving seems grounded in irritation more than faithfulness...checking off tasks rather than finding joy and meaning in the doing. But John does not follow Luke. “Martha served,” he says simply, and the word chosen is *diakoneo*, a discipleship verb, in the service of God.<sup>iii</sup> Martha’s is a different way of expressing love and devotion to Christ than Mary’s, but it is not a lesser way. She, too, is a model of discipleship.

\* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



Judas, as usual, provides the negative example—judgmental, penurious, exacting, and falsely pious. He is not wrong that there are many poor people who could be helped with a year’s salary worth of expensive perfume. His critique is not easily dismissed. But with his eye focused on his own bank balance, what Judas fails to see is the perfectly timed God-moment before him. The opportunity to do good now because here is where it is most needed now, an outpouring of love and devotion to the One who is in the midst of us.

On a shelf in the pastor’s study is a book of sermons by the 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian Paul Tillich. I find his books on theology imponderable, but his sermons are surprisingly simple and clear. One of them is on this incident in the Bible. Tillich titles it: “Holy Waste.” He begins: “What has she done? She has given an example of a waste which Jesus calls a beautiful thing...a holy waste, a waste growing out of the abundance of the heart. ...Who can blame the disciples,” Tillich then asks, “for being angry about the immense waste this woman has created? Certainly not a deacon who has to take care of the poor, or a social worker who knows the neediest cases and cannot help, or a church administrator who collects money for important projects.”

But then Tillich takes a surprising turn. He notes that Jesus and the early Church see the reasonable and balanced approach as lacking something of passion and great love and devotion. He says, “They knew that without the abundance of the heart nothing great can happen. They knew that religion within the limits of reasonableness is a mutilated religion, and that calculating love is not love at all. ...The history of humankind,” Tillich continues, “is the history of men and women who wasted themselves and were not afraid to do so. They did not fear the waste of themselves...of things, in the service of a new creation.” Tillich then counsels, “...Do not suppress in yourselves or others the abundant heart, the waste of self-surrender, the Spirit who trespasses all reason.”<sup>iv</sup>

I want to say today that I know, I understand, that you may be weary that we are still talking about, still trying to meet the Stewardship Goal set last fall. To be

\* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



honest, we are kind of tired, too, yet we believe we can still get there. I suppose a certain reasonableness, a more balanced or calculated approach might say, ‘Well, we have done all we can. I’m afraid we just need to think smaller, expect less, and act a bit more conservatively.’ And that is an option, of course.

But there is this moment before us...and when we look up from our bank balance, we see a certain moment just now...we see new members, more who will join today, who are finding a home here and meaning for their lives as they practice the faith alongside the rest of us. And while some churches go years without ever celebrating one baptism, we have them almost every month—and not just one, but often there are 3, 5, 6—infants and adults, too! There are 6 baptisms scheduled for May already! And 17 confirmands, who have been preparing all year to make their Profession of Faith, will join the church, and all of our youth will lead us in worship on Youth Sunday. We will be electing new officers and a Pastor Nominating Committee, all people willing to give time, skills and deep prayer. Our children are presenting a musical and in mid-May we are going to enjoy the Strawberry Festival on the street, oh—and I forgot the brass that will make Easter loud and shiny...and there is the 78<sup>th</sup> graduating class of our Brick Church School children...and a new urban garden we are helping to create in East Harlem and...I could go on and on...pouring it on...pouring it out...but the fragrance already fills this house and is wafting up and down the streets...

Some people have noticed this God-appointed moment and the opportunity to do now what is needful now; so they came together and then they came to us and said, “Here...here are our unreasonable, uncalculated, unafraid, wasteful gifts. Put them to use in the service of a new creation because we know how this story goes. Not to death, but to resurrection. To abundant hearts. To the Spirit that trespasses all reason. So, let’s see what we can do. Or, better, let’s see what God can do with us.

This story is so important it is in all four Gospels. What’s it really about? I think it’s about us. It’s about us.

*Amen.*



---

<sup>i</sup> Gail R. O'Day and Susan E. Hylan, **Westminster Bible Companion: John** (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 123.

<sup>ii</sup> Francis J. Moloney, **Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of John** (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 357.

<sup>iii</sup> Wes Howard-Brook, **Becoming Children of God: John's Gospel and Radical Discipleship** (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 269.

<sup>iv</sup> Paul Tillich, "Holy Waste" in **The New Being** (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), 46-49. I am indebted to a sermon by John Buchanan, "Holy Waste," preached at the Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago on September 25, 2011, for the reference to this sermon.