

'Outpouring Love'



Fifth Sunday in Lent
8:15 & 11:00 am, Sunday, March 13, 2016
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

[Isaiah 43:16-21](#); [Philippians 3:4b-14](#); [John 12:1-8](#)

Let's pray: May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen

The story of Prodigal Mary. That's the title I've just given today's gospel reading. The story of Prodigal Mary. (The word "prodigal" isn't a term we use much nowadays. It means "spending money or resources freely and recklessly, being wastefully extravagant." I've given our reading this title because it's the story of one disciple's response to Jesus' grace. No, I take that back. It's really a story of two disciples and their responses to Jesus' grace. So the title ought to be: The story of Prodigal Mary and Stingy Judas.

Do you recall last week's reading? Our gospel lesson was familiar one to many of us. It was the parable of the prodigal son, told by Jesus to those who grumbled about how he was way too welcoming of sinners and outcasts, how he (gasp!) even ate with them. So Jesus told this story of a wayward son who frivolously wastes half his father's inheritance. Upon realizing his mistakes, he returns home and discovers his father is prodigal, too. His father is absolutely extravagant in welcoming his son home, lavishing forgiveness and love upon him. Through this story Jesus tells a great truth about our gracious God who lavishes forgiveness and love upon us.

So, having just heard that story a week ago, and now hearing this account of Mary pouring expensive oils on Jesus' feet, and wiping his feet with her hair—well, that's why I call her Prodigal Mary. Extravagant actions. Lavish devotion. This is her over-the-top response to a God who has been generous in love and power. It is a response not only to this Jesus who is her teacher and friend, the one at whose feet she has listened and learned about the kingdom of God. This is her response to the Holy One who brought her brother Lazarus back from the dead.

You need only go back one chapter in John's Gospel (chapter 11), and you'll read that story. Lazarus was dead, entombed for four days. And Jesus is nowhere near Bethany, and has even been accused by Mary and her sister Martha for being far too late to do anything now for their poor dead brother. But then Jesus, in front of a mass of mourners, calls Lazarus out of the tomb and into life again. Lavishing his love and power on a dead man and grieving people in a manner that is simply over-the-top.

Is it no wonder that Mary, Lazarus' sister, would be absolutely prodigal in anointing Jesus' feet with sweet perfumed oil that costs a pretty penny? Money is no object where life is concerned. The cost of the nard is trivial compared to the presence of Jesus, which

she deems priceless. Mary responds in reckless abandon to her gracious God, and Jesus commends her wasteful extravagance. Not that she has any idea that her Lord's earthly days are numbered. Not that Mary has any idea what is to come—that Jesus will himself go and die as God's prodigal self-sacrifice for the world. Not that she has any idea that the fragrant oil she pours on Jesus' feet would be more suitable for his lifeless body before burial. No, Mary simply responds out of thankfulness for Jesus' generous life-giving ways in as generous a way as she can muster.

Now, Judas, on the other hand...He's much like the older son in last week's Prodigal son parable who thought his father was reckless in lavishing forgiveness and love upon the wayward younger son. That older son would have found better uses for the father's money and energy and love—mostly on himself. And here, today, is Judas, who finds Mary's extravagant anointing a complete waste of money. Surely there were better uses for the 300 denarii it cost to purchase that fragrant oil. And mostly those better uses would have involved Judas' self. Don't be fooled by Judas' suggestion the money could have been used for the poor. Don't suppose his compassion is getting the better of him. No, John makes clear that Judas, who managed to worm his way into being keeper of the disciples' till, actually was palming money from it regularly. Remember—this is the story of Prodigal Mary and Stingy Judas; the story of Devoted Mary and Deceitful Judas. What a contrast in response to a generous God!

Which leads us ultimately to consider our response to our prodigal God who gives himself so fully, lavishing love and forgiveness and eternal life and the Spirit's power on us. Are we prodigal Mary or stingy Judas? And if we can't quite make the connection with that long ago story, Pastor Sharron Blezard suggests this: "What if we replaced the extravagant perfume offering with a year's worth of our own time and/or wages? Would we respond more like Judas or Mary? What else in our individual lives or in our corporate lives might be the 21st century equivalent of Mary's lavish gift of prodigal love and complete trust?" (Sharron Blezard, *Stewardship of Life*, 3/12/13)

So, first I thought about our life together here. What if our devotion to God was such that worship attendance here was not quite so irregular, based on the weather or on whether there was something better to do on a Sunday morning? And what if we'd actually invite others to praise God with us here? What if we'd make the time to welcome our friends who join us this day so they will continue to know the generous love of God through us not just today, but in the weeks and months and years to come? What if we model for our children a devotion to God that is expressed in exuberance—worship that is joyful and thankful, an ardent participation with songs and prayers constantly on our lips? Not a devotion stingily doled out in carefully controlled measure—worship that is obligatory, mechanically rote, guilt-driven, or detached from the life-giver? And what if our communal life extended beyond this worship into all parts of this building, and we intentionally nurtured this community through the sharing of ourselves with one another, and encouraged the Spirit's gifts in each other to be used for the life of the world? An outpouring of love for Jesus Christ and the people that are his Body in this place. That would be like Prodigal Mary.

And then I went on to think about this weekend—our biennial "Weekend of Caring"—where we have a variety of ways in one weekend to do outreach in our nearby

communities. We collected food and monies for the hungry and homeless, baked cookies for at-home members, filled baskets of love with household items for those transitioning from prison life. On Friday we played Bingo and sang songs with our developmentally-disabled friends from CROSS. Yesterday we hung gently-used clothing on racks at Pink Hands of Hope. This afternoon we will lead worship with work-release folks and their families. But what if we didn't just do this once every two years? Instead, what if each of us embraced **one** of these ministries and gave it our all? Maybe went over-the-top in our time and energy and resources? An outpouring of love for our sisters and brothers in need? That would be like Prodigal Mary.

For example: The Kansas City Community Kitchen has flipped the look and common cultural understanding of a soup kitchen. At their site, a volunteer greeter escorts you to a table. Volunteer waitstaff show you a menu, and have you choose from a couple different healthy entrees and sides (based on food in season and available that day). Local culinary experts train folks in the kitchen in the art of food preparation, helping the hard-to-employ to gain real skills in the food industry. And then served to the hungry who come in the door are restaurant-quality meals like leg of lamb with steamed broccoli and rice pilaf; seasoned chicken with couscous and fresh fruit. A homeless man smiled at the feast before him and said, "They treat you like they don't know you're homeless."

The Kansas City Community Kitchen, supported by the Episcopal Church, lavishes God's love on the poor and unemployed. It is extravagant, compared to what most soup kitchens—God bless 'em—manage to do. Admittedly, this will take more time, creativity, resources, and volunteers, plus an ongoing commitment to offer the needy something that treats them with respect, feeding their spirit and self-confidence, not just their bellies.

Of course, after hearing Jesus tell Judas, "You always have the poor with you..." we might think such extravagance is wasteful. Shouldn't a cafeteria tray and a long line at the window to grab some grub suffice? Wouldn't that be better use for our limited benevolence dollars and resources?

Except Jesus was quoting scripture from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy 15:11: "For the poor will never cease out of the land; therefore I command you, you shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land." In other words, we who are generous with our devotion to our Lord are also expected by him to be generous with our devotion to our neighbor.

Yes, Jesus calls us to be prodigal—like Mary—out of love and thankfulness for our Prodigal God. **AMEN.**

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