

## AN EXTRAVAGANT GIFT

Scriptures: Mark 14:1-11; Deuteronomy 15:7-11

Last Wednesday at the House of Charity, I led a Bible study on this particular story from Mark, chapter 14. After we read it, all five of the people there shook their heads in disappointment—the homeless people as well as one of the volunteers who joined us for the Bible study. They were all disturbed by what they heard in this story.

A woman comes in and breaks open a jar of very expensive ointment. That little detail—breaking the jar—is very important. It means that the woman had no intention of saving it. She did not pour out a little then put cap back on. She broke it open and dumped the entire contents Jesus' head. The people watching were shocked. They said, "This ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii." A footnote at the bottom of the page in the pew Bibles explains what a denarius is worth. It says, "The denarius was the usual day's wage for a laborer." Three hundred denarii were equal to about one year's salary. One entire year's salary poured on Jesus' head! The people watching exclaim, "This ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor."

That is what the people at the House of Charity thought. One of them asked, "Why did Jesus let her do that when so many poor people need help?" Another said, "That must be the human Jesus coming through, the part that likes being adored by people."

In response Jesus says, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish." Jesus is quoting here from a verse in the Old Testament. You heard it a moment ago in our first scripture lesson. Deuteronomy 15:11 says, "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'" Yes, the Bible says, there will always be poor people in the world, but that does not mean we should ignore them and spend all our money on perfume.

Do you remember a story we read earlier this year in the gospel of Mark? Jesus meets a rich man and says, "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven" (Mark 7:21). He does not tell the man to sell everything he has and buy ointment. He says to give it to the poor. In Matthew's gospel Jesus says, "As you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." When we help the poor, we are helping Jesus. So why doesn't Jesus tell the woman to sell her ointment and give the money to the poor instead of pouring it over his head?

Once again we have a story in the gospel of Mark that makes no sense, that seems totally uncharacteristic of Jesus, unless ... unless he is using this story like a parable to reveal something about himself and about us.

To show you what I mean, take out a pew Bible and turn to the last chapter of Mark's gospel: Mark 16, beginning at verse 1 (NT, p. 54). The story we just read about the woman with the ointment took place two days before Passover, which means it happened on Tuesday night.

On the night of Passover, Thursday night, Jesus is arrested. The next day, Friday, he is put to death on the cross. Two days later on Sunday morning, three women come to Jesus' tomb. Mark 16:1 says, "When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices, so that they might go and anoint (Jesus' body)." We are not told how expensive these spices were, but they were probably very costly. But here is the point: No one even mentions the cost. Did you notice that? At this point in the story not one person complains about the money spent on spices or perfumes to give Jesus' body a dignified burial?

Let me try a comparison. Suppose you had an elderly mother or father living in Germany who was dying. If you bought a plane ticket, even at full fare, to fly back and see that mother or father, would anyone accuse you of wasting the money? Would anyone actually come up to you and say, "That plane ticket should have been sold and the money given to the poor." I don't think so. No one would question spending money to go see a loved one before he or she died.

Now let's go back to our scripture reading. Jesus is just outside Jerusalem. Three times in Mark's gospel he has told the disciples that he is going to Jerusalem to suffer and die. We learn in the first two verses that the chief priests are plotting to kill him, and in the last two verses we learn that Judas has agreed to betray him.

Do you see what is going on? The problem with those who complain about the woman's gift is not their concern for the poor; it is their blindness to the situation. Four days later when Jesus is dead, no one complains about the women buying expensive spices to anoint his body. It seemed like the least they could do to show their love and respect for Jesus. But four days earlier they complain. Why? They take Jesus for granted. It never occurs to them that Jesus might die, even though Jesus has told them three times that it is going to happen.

I once read a story about a gynecologist who asked another physician to take a look at his wife. He said, "My wife has been having abdominal problems, and I don't want to treat my own wife, so I wonder if you would exam her for me." The other physician agreed, so the gynecologist brought in his wife for an examination. The diagnosis turned out to be quite simple. She was five months pregnant. The gynecologist had not noticed his own wife's pregnancy. You wonder how she got his attention long enough to conceive. (Told by James Dobson in *Straight Talk to Men and Their Wives*, p. 96.)

I think Jesus has a similar problem with his followers. They never seemed to pay attention to him. They never really listened. The first time he tells the disciples that he is going to die, Peter dismisses the whole idea. The second time he tells them, the disciples get in an argument about which of them is the greatest. The third time he tells them, James and John ask to have special places of honor in his kingdom. Jesus must have felt like screaming, "Aren't you listening? Don't you understand what I am saying?" Apparently not.

But one woman did. We don't even know her name, which is ironic since Jesus says that what she has done will be told all over the world in memory of her. We don't know her name, but while the other disciples are arguing about which of them is the greatest, while the other disciples are jockeying for positions of honor in Jesus' administration, one woman realizes the sacrifice Jesus is about to make and honors him with the greatest gift she has.

If the woman's gift seems extravagant to you, almost wasteful, perhaps you don't realize what an extravagant gift Jesus himself has given to us. Like the gynecologist who did not notice his own wife's pregnancy, we have been around Jesus so long, we don't notice him anymore. We have seen so many crosses, we forget what it represents. The fact is Jesus died on one of those crosses. His body was broken on it, just as surely as the woman broke her alabaster jar. His blood was poured out on it, just as surely as the woman poured out her ointment. Jesus did not just give us a year's salary; he gave us his life. It was an extravagant gift.

In a book called *The Cost of Discipleship* Dietrich Bonhoeffer explains that God's grace in Jesus Christ is free, but not cheap. He writes,

Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it cost a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: "You were bought at a price," and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us (pp. 47-48).

This story does not mean we should spend a year's salary on a bottle of perfume. Even less does it mean we should ignore the poor. This story reminds us that Jesus has given us an extravagant gift, and nothing short of our extravagant response will do it justice.

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August 24, 2008