



“The Path”

Sermon Title: “Almost Done, but Not Yet”

Preaching Text: John 12:1-8
FUMC—Arlington, Texas 76011
Lent 5—13 March 2016

“The most wasted of all days is one without laughter” (—e e cummings).

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John’s Gospel tells us that Jesus went with his disciples to Ephraim after Jesus raised Lazarus from the tomb. Rather than go about openly, Jesus travels near this wilderness region to rest, pray, and prepare for his Jerusalem fate. Six days before the Passover, Jesus comes to Lazarus, Mary, and Martha’s home for a meal. We expect a festive mood. While Lazarus plays host, Martha serves. All was in place for a fine meal. Then it happened—Mary does the unexpected. Listen to John’s Gospel:

1 Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 3 Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. 4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5 “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” 6 (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it). 7 Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8 You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me” (John 12:1-8).

This all too practical question interrupts Mary’s lovely gesture: “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” Despite Judas asking the question, we admit it is a good question. How many times have we seen a waste of resources that people could use for something useful? Burning oil wells from Kuwait in 1991 comes to mind. Yet, even in the normal course of life, we see waste all about us. The old American proverb teaches us: “Waste not; want not.”

While in college, I stopped by the grocery store and bought five gallons of ice cream for a graduation party. Most college students don’t have a lot of money so the purchase was a dear

one. On the way to the ice cream freezer, I saw my buddies playing basketball. They needed a sixth to play three-on-three. I thought, well a few minutes won't hurt. But to my dismay, after 90 minutes in the hot Texas May sun all I had left was liquid in my car trunk. What a waste.

In 1986 my wife gave me a new clock radio for my birthday. I put our baby to sleep on our bed and turned on a reading light above the radio. Evidently the spring slowly lowered the light onto the top of the radio after I left. After thirty minutes I smelled something kind of funny. It smelled like burning plastic. Sure enough the whole top of the radio had melted into a pool of plastic. I never even heard the radio or alarm one time. What a waste.

One of the most appalling things about war beyond the loss of human life is the enormous cost of such activity. Surely the human race could put the money to wage war to better use. What a waste.

I knew a young woman once who had every God-given gift a person could want. She had a wonderful personality, was smart, a good student, and beautiful. Then she fell into cahoots with the wrong crowd. She went to jail for partaking false drugs. She would have made a wonderful doctor—she had all the natural gifts—but she never even made it out of high school. What a waste!

Judas is no one's favorite. History despises Judas as the worst of all traitors. Few people conjure a redeeming quality with which to describe him. Yet, Judas asked a good question: "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" In a world of limited resources, Judas asked a reasonably practical question that intelligent and logical folks might ask: "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"

Judas' question was logical and a good biblical/ethical question too. The Bible is full of texts that urge us to remember the poor. Here are eight of the hundred+ references we could cite:

*When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for

the alien: I am the Lord your God (Leviticus 23:22).

*I command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land" (Deuteronomy 15:11).

*Happy are those who consider the poor; the Lord delivers them in the day of trouble (Psalm 41:1).

*Those who despise their neighbors are sinners, but happy are those who are kind to the poor (Proverbs 14:21).

*Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor (Proverbs 22:9).

*Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy (Proverbs 31:9).

*Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine (Amos 5:11).

*Jesus said, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Matthew 19:21).

An all too real-world question interrupts Mary's lovely gesture: "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" This is a good question asked by an evil person. Thus I rummaged my mind and searched my brain for an answer. If we hate waste and we want to do as God tells us and help provide for the poor then "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"

The answer I believe lies in the moment and its context. The moment of such extravagance dictates the action that Mary took. Mary's loved Jesus. What may be more important is that Jesus loved Mary and Mary's family. Jesus even brought Mary's brother Lazarus back from the dead. Thus it is fitting and proper for Mary to give Jesus the one extravagant gift she could. She gave him everything she had!

Fred Craddock told a story about the time that someone called him late on a Saturday

night to teach Sunday school the next morning. The teacher was ill and it was a large class. Because he had little time to prepare he thought he would teach about the parable of the Prodigal Son, but tell the story backwards in order to elicit some class discussion. When he got to the part where the story tells us “while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20) Craddock changed the story. He said, “His father severely rebuked him and told him to sleep in the barn and eat bread and drink water until such a time as he would be fully incorporated back into the family.” Someone from the back of the class cried out, “That’s how it should have been.”

Yet, in the life of the gospel, context is everything. The father’s words to his prodigal son tell us why they killed the stalled calf and put a robe on the boy: “This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (Luke 15:24)!

The gospel of God is extravagant and at the times that love calls for excess. This is why Mary “got it” and no one else. She poured out her perfume on Jesus’ feet because that is what the moment called for. It is also why, when Judas asks the question he did, that Jesus tells us something about Mary. Even 20 centuries later we remember: “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me” (John 12:7-8).

Most of the time—God makes us free to be frugal, live simply, and care for the poor. But when Jesus is with us, then this is a time for extravagance!