

INVITED TO LOVE EXTRAVAGANTLY

John 12:1-8 or Matthew 26:6-13
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Community Church, Congregational
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When my spouse B. J. was pastor of the Fox Island UCC, he mentored a lot of men who weren't so sure about organized religion, but were happy to drop off their wives and children for church each week. Over the years, some of those men became close friends or even active church members. But one in particular came to mind this week as I was thinking about this woman in our scripture today and her extravagant gift of anointing Jesus with costly oil. Rob was a skeptic, if ever I'd met one. He was a pragmatist who was running a successful business, had built a waterfront home for his family, and was helping his wife raise three wonderful kids. But he'd long ago left behind his Catholic roots to pursue his spiritual journey individually. He was well read and appreciated the arts, but also fervently committed to justice and building a society that cared for others. He resisted all things organized religion, and was vocal in his criticism of the Catholic Church. So, we were a bit surprised when he told us that his upcoming trip to Rome would include several days visiting the Vatican and the Sistine Chapel. He'd always said he thought Catholic cathedrals were wasteful and extravagant; too much Catholic money was spent on buildings and infrastructure and priests, and not enough on caring for the poor and making the world outside the walls of the church a better place. But off he went, to view the extravagant artwork of Vatican City and gaze upon the frescos of the City's famous Chapel. Extravagance does have its pull.

And so we come to a scriptural story of extravagance – pouring precious, costly oil on Jesus' head and feet, and filling a household with the strong aroma of the fragrant perfume. There are only a handful of Jesus' stories that find their way into all four gospels, but today's

story of anointing Jesus with precious oil is one of those stories.ⁱ It's different with each telling, but in all four gospels, Jesus begins his journey toward Jerusalem and the cross with this stop in Bethany, where a woman anoints him with expensive oil. Soon after, Jesus and the disciples will continue on to Jerusalem with a triumphal entry and a Passover celebration that will become his Last Supper before his trial and crucifixion. We stand at that entry point: In Bethany, outside of Jerusalem, awaiting the Passover celebration, and awaiting the sorrowful and difficult final steps on the journey to the cross.

But first, a ritual of anointing. Although the woman and the situation are a bit different in each gospel, there are three common themes that are remembered each time: she anoints Jesus with extravagantly expensive oil; people in the room object to the outrageous expense; but Jesus blesses the gift, proclaiming it an anointing preparation for his death and burial. Jesus blesses and thanks this woman for giving and loving so extravagantly. There is no condemnation about wasteful spending or inappropriate gifts. Rather, Jesus offers pure gratitude, blessing, and love in return for the abundant gifts of gratitude, blessing and love she has shown to him.

Extravagance is sometimes considered sinful or wasteful. I've even heard people resist the extravagance of God's love, the unconditional nature of Christ's grace, thinking it's just "too much" or "not deserved." The disciples who object to this woman's gift reflect that type of limited, judgmental thinking. Christ invites us to turn that thinking around, and accept or even celebrate the gift of extravagant love.

At first hearing, the disciples' objections sound righteous and just: "The perfume could have been sold, and the money given to the poor!" But as they speak, the disciples who object are reflecting this limited belief in a finite nature of God's resources. But God's resources are beyond infinity. God's love is boundless, and God's gifts are endless. But still, people fall back

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into that fear of scarcity, thinking there must be limits to what God can do for us. This also happens when people speak about not deserving God's grace and love, as if grace and love were finite, gifts to be earned or saved so that there's plenty to go around. But these gifts are infinite – grace and love that knows no bounds, no limits, no scarcity. Jesus wants us to receive this love and grace fully and gratefully, as he received this woman's love and grace fully and gratefully.

Love is an infinite resource. Grace is a gift without bounds. There is abundance always available to us, through God's creative presence and endless love. And there are moments when what's most important is remembering and reflecting the infinite nature of God's creative presence and endless love. That's what this anointing does for Jesus; he gets to receive a sign of God's creative presence and endless love from this woman before he faces what most likely is the most difficult week of his life. She offers her gifts fully: an expensive jar of fragrant oil, her gentle healing touch, and her merciful loving presence. Everything she has to give, she is pouring into this moment with Jesus, as if she knows at some mystical level that this may be the last time she ever gets to listen to this man, care for his needs, and express her love and gratitude.

How often do we love that extravagantly? How often do we offer ourselves as fully to someone as this woman did?

Yes, loving extravagantly might be a challenge; but it also can be a gift. A few years ago, a couple from one of my previous churches asked me to help their young daughter discern about college choices. She and I spent many Sunday afternoons talking and praying together, looking at various colleges, and then discussing with her parents her strong sense of call and yearning to study worship and music at a Christian liberal arts university. The family knew this tuition would be a big stretch. Mom had always been a full-time homemaker, and the whole family –

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Mom included - wanted and needed her in that role for the foreseeable future. Dad made a good income and they'd saved some for college, but not nearly enough for the extravagance of a four-year private school education. But after much prayer and discernment, and visiting a half dozen other college campuses, they all agreed this school was the right choice for her. Somehow, they all tightened their belts and made it happen. They grew incredibly focused about this shared goal, this common vision – to give her the education they all felt called for her to receive. Dad's bonuses have all gone to one cause. Mom's part-time wages have all gone to one cause. Even their time prioritizes this one cause. They schedule their social life around their daughter's college choir concert schedule, and many Sundays find them visiting the churches where her music groups are performing and leading worship. Their daughter's sole focus for these years has been embracing her education and all the opportunities that education has afforded her – studying, learning, practicing, performing, worshipping, praying, leading worship, leading music, and then studying, learning, and practicing even more. With her senior year just around the corner, she's realizes she's not going to be quite finished at the end of that 4th year. She had to admit to Mom and Dad what was going on, so she was pretty nervous about telling them. Just when she thought her parents would throw up their hands in frustration, she was surprised by their gift of grace. When she told them the news, they responded: "Take the time you need, honey. You've come this far. Just finish the journey. You're doing your part with scholarships and your work study job. Stay the extra year and get the education you need." They love their daughter to extravagance, but this seemingly extravagant gift of an expensive education feels perfectly right to those two parents well into their 4th year of high tuition payments. As they told me their story, I could sense their calm assurance that this was the right decision, and always had been. No, it didn't seem like the logical choice 5 years ago when we started the discussion. But

now they see before them a young woman who has grown musically, spiritually, personally, and professionally – a woman who is just beginning to discern her vocation and purpose in life, but is well on that road to finding her path and having the education she needs to walk that path. Extravagant love opened up a world of giving generously to their daughter that they didn't even know they were capable of. And she's reflected that gift as she's embarked on 3 mission trips during her college years to share her gifts and ministry amongst some of the poorest nations on earth. A girl who could hardly make it through a high school mission trip on a Native American reservation here in California is now on her way to Indonesia this spring, all because she and her parents embraced their extravagant love for one another and their extravagant trust in God to make this path possible for their family. "No regrets," her mom tells me, "It's been worth every penny, every struggle, every stretch. After all, she is our only child and we're only going to get to send her to college once."

This woman in today's scripture probably didn't know that this would be the last time she sat at Jesus' feet. We just never know.... How often do we make decisions and act as if this might just be the last opportunity we have to show someone how very much we love and care for them? It doesn't have to be about giving our money extravagantly. Much more often what people need is for us to give ourselves extravagantly--our love, our time and our talents. In today's scripture, Christ affirms this woman's extravagant love and in doing so, Jesus invites us to give and love extravagantly, as that woman gave and loved extravagantly. Whether we are giving our time, or a special talent, or a spiritual gift, or a financial gift, or our loving presence, when we give extravagantly we are reflecting the extravagant love and the abundant gifts that God gives to us so generously.

Michelangelo was hesitant when the Pope asked him to design and paint a fresco on the
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ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, for Michelangelo was much more confident in his talents as a sculptor. He knew this would be difficult work in a medium that wasn't his favorite and in a venue that was hardly easy to reach. But some 500 years later, our skeptical friend Rob stood beneath that ceiling and gazed in wonder for hours, astounded at the sacred beauty he discovered there. He came home shaking his head in astonishment. "For the first time in my life," he told us, "I finally understand why the church has invested millions of dollars and hours into supporting the arts. All those beautiful works of music, all of those creative pieces of art, and all of the majestic architecture of cathedrals and temples inspire us to something bigger and more beautiful than ourselves. I saw God's beauty on that chapel ceiling, I sensed a mysterious presence I've never felt before, and I finally kind of get it."

Perhaps this woman's story of extravagant giving was written down to help us "finally get it." We are invited to embrace life and faith so fully that we might love and give extravagantly every day—as if it were our last day on earth, or the last day with those we have the privilege to love and serve. As Christians, we are all on the same journey as Jesus—we are all on a journey to the cross. As humans, we are all journeying toward death. But at each and every step of this journey, we have an opportunity to love extravagantly and to give abundantly. And, we are invited to embrace the extravagant, giving love of God and God's people each and every day. Accept the invitation, you might just "get it," and discover how transformative the anointing of extravagant love can be.

Loving God, you have cared for us all our lives.
 Give us eyes to see your vision for the world.
 Give us love to pour out your passion for others.
 Give us courage to follow you to a future
 grounded in healing and hope.

ⁱ [Matthew 26:6–13; Mark 14:3–9; Luke 7:36–50; John 12:1–8](#)