

Extravagant Love 11-22-09
By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Mark 14:3-9

3 While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. ⁴But some were there who said to one another in anger, 'Why was the ointment wasted in this way? ⁵For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.' And they scolded her. ⁶But Jesus said, 'Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. ⁷For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. ⁸She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. ⁹Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.'

The story from scripture today is about extravagant love.

Nonsensical, impractical, wasteful, love poured out. Because of her relationship with Jesus... because of her gratitude for the love and grace she knew because of Jesus' life and teaching, this woman gave away the most precious gift she, no doubt, had. She took this alabaster jar of oil, broke it open and poured it out to anoint Jesus,

just as one would anoint a king. But this king was on the verge of giving his life for in order to proclaim, in every way, the kingdom of God. And in God's kingdom, there is mercy and grace, forgiveness and wholeness, healing and new life. The woman seemed to "get" that and couldn't hold back. In case you're wondering, 300 denari was about a year's wage. This gift; this extravagant love poured out seemed to Jesus' closest followers an outrageous gesture that could have been better given. And given the economic situation worldwide, it seems pretty foolish to us, too, doesn't it. I mean, really, we live in an era a scarcity, right? We need to downsize and cut back, right? The thing is, God is a God of abundance, not scarcity. So when we are in tune with God, our generosity flows, and just as in the story of the loaves and the fish, there is more than enough. But holding on and holding back has a different result.

Here's a story about the mentality of scarcity:

A Nigerian tribal chief sent out his messengers to invite all the men of the tribe to a great feast. "All of the food will be provided," they announced, "but each man must bring one jug of palm wine."

Well there was a certain man, Ezra, who wanted to attend this great festival very much, but he had no wine. He paced the floor trying to think of a solution for his dilemma. Finally his wife said, "Just go and buy a jug of wine. It's not too expensive for such a great occasion."

"How foolish," Ezra cried, "to spend money when there is a way to go for free." Again he paced until he came up with a plan. "Instead of wine, I will carry water in my jug. Several hundred will attend the festival. What will it hurt to add one jug of water to the great pot of wine?"

On the day of the feast, the tribal drums began beating early in the morning, reminding the people of the great festival. All of the men came dressed in their finest clothes, gathering by midmorning at the home of the chief. As each man entered the tribal grounds, he poured

his jug of wine into a large earthen pot. Ezra carefully poured the contents of his container into the pot, greeted the chief, and joined the dancers.

When all the guests arrived, the chief commanded the music to stop and ordered the servants to fill everyone's glass with wine. As the chief spoke the opening words of the festival, all of the guests raised their glasses and drank. Suddenly a cry of disbelief arose from the crowd, and they quickly drank again. What they tasted was not wine, but water. Each guest had decided that his one jug of water wouldn't spoil the great pot of palm wine.

That's the fruit of a scarcity mentality - of holding on - of holding back. But that's not the nature of God as Jesus showed us in what he taught and lived. That scarcity mentality was not what caused the woman, whose act of extravagant love would be talked about worldwide, to break open that alabaster jar and anoint Jesus. It is not the mentality that has changed the hearts of countless people through the ages. It is not the mentality that saves us and heals us and

inspires us to love God with heart, soul strength and mind, and our neighbor as ourselves.

There is another story - one of extravagant love - one I think I have shared before, but bears repeating. It is the story of two brothers who farmed together. They shared equally in all the work and split the profits exactly. Each had his own granary. One of the brothers was married and had a large family; the other brother was single. One day the single brother thought to himself, "It is not fair that we divide the grain evenly. My brother has many mouths to feed, while I have but one. I know what I'll do. I will take a sack of grain from my granary each evening and put it in my brother's granary." So each night when it was dark, he carefully carried a sack of grain, placing it in his brother's barn.

Now the married brother thought to himself, "It is not fair that we divide the grain evenly. I have many children to care for me in my old age, and my brother has none. I know what I'll do, I will take a sack

of grain from my granary each evening and put it in my brother's granary. And he did.

Each morning the two brothers were amazed to discover that though they had removed a sack of grain the night before, they had just as many. One night the two brothers met each other halfway between their barns, each carrying a sack of grain. Then they understood the mystery. They embraced and loved each other deeply.

Twentieth century theologian, Karl Barth, once said that the source of all sin is ingratitude, and if the source of all sin is ingratitude, the inverse is equally true: gratitude is the source of all goodness, gladness, of generosity. If you want to know how to live a life that is pleasing to God and, for that matter, to others and to yourself, try being a thankful person; try letting go and not holding back; try giving generously as a response to the God whom we praise and from whom all blessings flow. Jesus' abundant living and relating had infected this woman with the alabaster jar, and she understood that Jesus came to show us the way to a God of abundance; a God of

extravagant love poured out for all, and she didn't hold back. She gave her greatest treasure. When we allow our lives and our resources to be directed by the power of God's love, scarcity no longer holds sway and abundance becomes the order of the day.

Today we wrap up the fall series called *Movement for Wholeness*. Each week since mid-September we have looked at a statement of who we are at First Christian Church - a statement that came out of many conversations and which is still a work in progress, but nonetheless, captures what is important to us as a faith community. One line in that statement reads, "We are students of Jesus, who did not start a religion but launched a movement of extravagant love...". Here, on this last Sunday of the fall emphasis, we see that the essence is really that God loves so completely, and that love is poured out, not based on our own merit or what we deserve, not based on common sense or what society would expect or demand, but rather is freely given. And the more it is given the more there is, just like the song I sang with the kids. As followers of Christ, we are invited into abundant life - a life

of extravagance and outrageous generosity because of what God in Christ has done. I recently received an email from an Elder of this church. The Elder ended with this blessing that I thought a fitting way to end this sermon, "May Jesus' spirit of living fully and loving wastefully forever be your strength and mine." Amen.