

“COSTLY EXTRAVAGANCE”

JOHN 12:1-11, LENT 5-C, MARCH 13, 2016

Charles Spurgeon has long been considered to be one of the most influential preachers of the Gospel in the 19th Century. He was born in London, England in 1834 and lived there all of his life and only 58 years old at the time of his death in 1892. He was a prolific author, having published many of the sermons he had written, commentaries on the book of the Bible, books on prayer and on discipleship and the like!

Recently I came across a little snippet of information about Charles and Susannah Surgeons' lives. They owned chickens and yet would never give away any of the eggs their chickens laid for free; not even to brothers or sisters, nephews or nieces; not to anyone! Unfortunately, many people drew the false conclusion that they were stingy and greedy people, when nothing could have been further from the truth. They never kept any of the proceeds from the sale of those eggs for themselves. Years later the truth came out that all of the proceeds from the sale of those eggs went 100% to the support of two elderly widows.

Even though Charles Spurgeon never mentioned this great act of kindness from the pulpit, someone later wrote that this act, in and of itself, constituted one of the greatest sermons Charles Spurgeon ever preached. Years ago, I came across a little poem entitled “Sermons that We See!” I’d like to share it with you:

I’d rather see a sermon than hear one any day!
I’d rather one should walk with me than merely point the way!
And best of all the preachers are the men who live their creeds.
Seeing love in action—is what everybody needs!

This episode in our Gospel lesson this morning must have been regarded by the early church to be a quintessential story in the life and ministry of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, because it is recorded for us in three of the New Testament Gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke.

St. Matthew and St. Mark agree with St. John that this event took place in that little bedroom community, or suburb called “Bethany,” only 2 miles outside the city of Jerusalem. It was where Mary, Martha, and Lazarus all lived and it was there, just 2 or 3 days before this, to where our Lord Jesus had gone there and raised Lazarus from the dead; whose body had already been in the tomb for 4 days.

But this time, Jesus and his disciples were invited to a dinner party in Bethany, but not at Mary’s, Martha’s, and Lazarus’ personal residence, but at the home of a man, Matthew and Mark identify for us as “Simon the Leper.” It’s quite possible that this was not his real name, at least not “the Leper” part, but that that Simon had been a man whom Jesus had healed from his leprosy, and so to show our Lord his deep gratitude he invites Jesus and his disciples and a few other prominent people from Bethany; over to his house he got this name because he had been a man who had suffered from leprosy, but whom Jesus had cured.

Sometime during that dinner party, Mary, who must have been invited there along with her sister Martha, and probably Lazarus also, moves over to where Jesus is at. This is where Jesus is “reclining at table,” because that’s how people ate in that Middle Eastern culture. The table was usually a big round table about 2 feet off the ground. There Jesus is propped up on his left hand, so that his right hand could reach food on the table. This is when Mary breaks open that very expensive “pound of expensive ointment” (John 12:3).

Matthew tells us: “A woman came up to him with an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment, and she poured it on his head,” as he reclined table.

Mark also tells us: “A woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment, of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head.”

John tells us: “Mar anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair.”

It seems that Mary must have been very extravagant in the use of this costly perfume that she had poured out on her Lord, the same Lord who had raised her brother Lazarus from the dead just a few days before; anointing Jesus’ head, as well as his feet, and drying his feet with her hair!

Obviously, this perfume was NOT like the kind of inexpensive perfume we might buy across the street at Walgreens for \$10 or \$20 a bottle. This was some very expensive perfume that Judas estimated would have cost somewhere close to 300 “denarii;” about the average working man’s annual salary in those days; that today might be the equivalent of some \$30 thousand. Other Bible commentators tell us that it was probably imported from the Himalayas in what we know today as southern Asia.

Yes, this perfume was among one of Mary’s most prized material possessions, the best she had to give. While other people talked about their love for Jesus, Mary showed her love for Jesus by her actions. She poured her most prized material-possession on the feet of Jesus. --Well St. John, who wrote our Gospel lesson many years later, tells us that Judas questioned Mary’s “costly extravagance,” not because he had a heart for poor people, but because he was “the keeper of the money bag,” and he sometimes dipped his hand into that moneybag, what we might call today a “cookie jar,” for his own personal needs and wants!

- (1) Why did Mary do such a thing? Certainly, Mary was grateful to Jesus for raising her brother Lazarus from the dead; a rather long episode in Jesus ministry that John reports to us very carefully back in the previous chapter; chapter 11. It was on this day, John tells us that Jesus also spoke some very powerful words when he told us: “I am the Resurrection and the Life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die (John 11:25-26)?
- (2) But secondly, let’s not forget that there was another important CHARACTERISTIC THAT TYPIFIED MARY’S WHOLE APPROACH TO LIFE—IS THAT SHE LOVED TO SIT AT JESUS’ FEET AND LISTEN INTENTLY TO GOD’S WORD (Luke 10:38-42).

You remember that story don’t you, from the 10th chapter of Luke Gospel? St. Luke tells us that on that particular day, a woman named “Martha” had welcomed Jesus and his disciples into their home. And that this gal named “Martha,” also had a sister named “Mary.” And what was Mary doing on this important day? Luke tells us, “Martha had a sister called Mary, who sat the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching” (Luke 10:39).

Martha was getting a little ticked off with her sister Mary. There Martha was slaving away in the kitchen to present before Jesus and his disciples what probably must have been by today’s standards a 5 course gourmet meal. I sometimes have wondered what Martha would be serving to Jesus and her other guests today, if she had been living with us here in our modern culture. Perhaps the main entrée would be PRIME RIB, OR DUCK OLORANGE OR BAKED ALASKA? I probably imagine too that she would have washed all of her crystal wine classes in Cascade to make sure that they were absolutely free of every water spot!

She was feeling backlogged and resentful towards Mary for sitting at Jesus’ feet rather than assisting her in the kitchen by helping her to present that five-course meal! Luke tells us that “Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to Jesus and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me! But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion which will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:40-42)!

Yes, Jesus says about Mary's action in pouring that "expensive ointment made from pure nard (John 12:3)," on his feet: "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial."

BUT ISN'T IT JUST AS POSSIBLE THAT MARY WHO HAD SUCH A DISTINCT REPUTATION FOR BEING ONE OF JESUS' DISCIPLES WHO LOVED TO SIT AT HIS FEET AND TO ALLOW HERSELF TO BECOME ABSOLUTELY, TOTALLY ABSORBED IN HIS VERY WORD THAT SHE POSSIBLY COULD HAVE THAT FLOWING TO HER OUT OF OUR SAVIOR'S MOUTH—THAT SHE NOT ONLY WAS PRESENT AND HEARD JESUS SPEAK OF HIS OWN IMPENDING SUFFERING AND PASSION, AS HE SURELY DID, AT LEAST THREE TIMES BEFORE THAT DREADFUL HOUR CAME—BUT IN CONTRADISTINCTION TO THE MANY OTHER DISCIPLES OF JESUS, WHO SIMPLY LET THESE ALL-IMPORTANT WORDS OF JESUS ABOUT HIS DEATH AND RESURRECTION—SIMPLY GO INTO ONE OF THEIR EARS AND OUT THE OTHER, THAT SHE NOT ONLY HEARD JESUS' WORDS BUT ALSO BELIEVED THEM TO BE 100% TRUE!

Why did Mary express her love for Jesus with such costly extravagance? PERHAPS SHE REALIZES THAT THOUGH SHE COULD NOT STOP JESUS FROM GOING TO THE CROSS, OR DISSUADE HIM IN ANY WAY, AS PETER AT ONE TIME ATTEMPTED TO DO (Matthew 16:21-23), SHE COULD SHOW TO JESUS THAT SHE REALLY LOVED HIM AND THAT SHE HAD INDEED LISTENED TO HIM AND TRULY, TRULY, DID BELIEVE HIS WORD! His crucifixion was imminent, and his burial too!

Maybe another reason Mary of Bethany does this is not only because she can afford to do it, but also because she regarded Jesus as her best and truest Friend. And isn't this a good question that this season of Lent presents to every one of us this time of year?

Do we truly see Jesus as our Friend? And are we willing to listen again intently these days to what our Friend is saying to us: "This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends, if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the Master is doing; but I have called you friend, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father" (John 15:12-15)!

I titled the sermon today: "Costly Extravagance" because this is the way that true love, between two people, who genuinely love and care for one another, so often expresses itself. Husbands who take their wives out on the town for a 25th Wedding Anniversary celebration, if they have the means, will probably take their wives to one of the finest restaurants in the city where they are living, rather than to go through a drive-thru for a "Big Mac Special" at McDonalds.

And has been the strength of the Christian Church throughout the ages, those who truly come to believe in Jesus, and know him not only as their Savior and Lord, but also as their truest and most beloved Friend...will exercise a certain amount of COSTLY EXTRAVANCE TOWARDS JESUS TOO...IN THE USE OF THEIR TIME, THEIR TALENTS AND THEIR TREASURES!

Why do people here at Mount Olive congregation and so many other countless Christian congregations do it? Why do they devote hours to singing in the choir, playing the organ, practicing hand bells? Why are they willing to teach Sunday School, or assume a position of great responsibility in our corporate life of faith together – in serving Christ as the President, or Vice-President, or Treasurer, or Financial Secretary, or as a chairperson of one of our many other church boards, or to even serve as a board member on one of those boards, or help make it possible for our high school youth to attend the National Youth Gathering this coming July in New Orleans?

Isn't it, first and foremost, always because of their deep, personal love, and commitment towards Jesus Christ? It's because when they sing those words, they really mean them: "What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and grief to bear! What a privilege to carry, everything to God in prayer! Oh, what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry, everything to God in prayer!"

So let me close by sharing with you a true story about a man who is now a Lutheran pastor, who actually graduated many years ago from the seminary here in Columbia, but before attending seminary taught students in a public school in Camden, SC. The man's name is Frank Honeycutt.

Frank wrote in a publication of his: "Most of the kids I taught in school were poor and that he specifically remembered a little girl named Natasha, who brought him a Christmas present to school one December, on the day before school let out for the Christmas break. Mr. Honeycutt remembered that the girl was usually very shy and hardly ever spoke to him or anyone for that matter. After the school bell rang that day, she came up to his desk and handed him a present.

It turned out to be a very nice present and Mr. Honeycutt was certain that this present was far more than her family could actually afford, but he would also never forget Natasha standing there in front of his school desk looking so very proud and beaming from ear to ear as she presented him with that gift.

Apparently, this young lady's parents were deeply grateful that Mr. Honeycutt was her teacher and that he had taken such a personal interest in the welfare of their child. They certainly didn't need to buy him a gift, but they were so very grateful for the way that Natasha was now taking her school work more seriously than she had ever done before. So what could Mr. Honeycutt possibly have done except to simply hug that little girl and to say thank you as he received her gift.

In this season of Lent, we are grateful to our loving Heavenly Father who cared enough to give to every one of us his very best, Jesus Christ: "The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29)!

In Romans 5, St. Paul writes: "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare to die—but God shows us his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life! More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation" (Romans 5:6-11).

St. Paul certainly came to understand, didn't he, by the grace of God, the great significance of all that our God had sent his Son Jesus Christ into this world to do for us and to do for all people everywhere?

Paul wrote: "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that depends upon the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:7-11)!

In our Old Testament lesson today, the Prophet Isaiah is remind the children of Israel who were still being held captive as political exiles in Babylon, that God would soon be freeing them from that whole terrible ordeal. He strengthens this faith within them by reminding them of God's great saving acts in history, how centuries before this he had freed their ancestors from 400 years of slavery in Egypt and led them through the wilderness to the Promised Land under the leadership of Moses.

Isaiah tells the Israelites that as magnificently stupendous as all of God's saving acts were for them in history that God was still going to even surpass the wonder of all that in leading them home from their time of captivity in the Babylonian exile that was now coming to an end. But still the world, really, had seen nothing yet! How much more God will still do for them and us and all of humankind in the sending of his Son among us to become a ransom for us all!

God was saying to his people of old: "You haven't seen anything yet!" And Paul expresses those same sentiments on God's part towards all of us when he wrote in 1 Corinthians 2:9: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, what God has prepared for those who love him, but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit!"

Because of the Spirit's work in our lives, we have hope for the future, not only in this life, but for all eternity as well! To God be the glory, great things he has done! Amen