

Text: John 12:1-18
Theme: Extravagant Gratitude (Brief comment and reflection I)
Minister: Reverend Dele Agbelusi
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Brief Comment and Reflection

A few years ago, Mark Trotter told a true story about a man in New York City who was kidnapped. His kidnappers called his wife and asked for \$100,000 ransom. She talked them down to \$30,000. The story had a happy ending: the man returned home unharmed, the money was recovered, and the kidnappers were caught and sent to jail. But, don't you wonder what happened when the man got home and found that his wife got him back for a discount? Calvin Trillin wrote about this incident. He imagined out loud what the negotiations must have been like: '\$100,000 for that old guy? You have got to be crazy. Just look at him! Look at that gut! You want \$100,000 for that? You've got to be kidding. Give me a break here. \$30,000 is my top offer.'

Mark Trotter concluded his rendition of the story with this thoughtful comment: "I suppose there are some here this morning who can identify with the wife in that story, but for some reason, I find myself identifying with the husband. I'd like to think if I were in a similar situation, there would be people who would spare no expense to get me back. They wouldn't haggle over the price. They wouldn't say, 'Well, let me think about it.' I'd like to think that they would say, 'We'll do anything for you.'" (Mark Trotter 4/2/95)

The point of that story is this: sometimes it's O.K. to be extravagant! Now, that is precisely what this story in the Gospel of Mark is all about. Remember the story with me. Jesus is on His way to the cross. It is just a few days before Passover. The chief priests and scribes are plotting against Him. Judas is about ready to betray Him. The crucifixion is less than a week away and Jesus knows it. Jesus and His disciples stop at Bethany... just a few days before, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead there in Bethany. Now, as they are having dinner, a woman comes to Jesus and does a beautiful but extravagant thing for our Lord. The Gospel of John tells us that the woman was Mary, (the sister of Martha and Lazarus). Mary brings an alabaster jar of very expensive ointment. She breaks open the jar and pours the costly perfumed oil on Jesus' head...she anoints His head with oil.

Why did she do that? Some say it was an act of gratitude in which she was thanking Jesus for raising her brother Lazarus from the dead. Some say it was an act of consecration in which she was baptizing Jesus to encourage Him to go into the Holy City and do what had to be done. Others say it was a foreshadowing, an act of preparation, in which she was anointing His body for the death which was to come in Jerusalem a few days later. All say it was an act of love and kindness.

But the story doesn't end there. Mary (after doing this beautiful thing) is criticized by some of the folks in the room. The Gospel of John says that Judas reprimanded her for being so wasteful. And then Jesus reprimands Judas for being so 'stingy.'

Stinginess means being overly concerned about money... sort of like the kidnapped man's wife who obviously felt that money was very important. Maybe she reasoned like this: 'Which is easier to replace, a husband or \$100,000?' That is stingy, materialistic thinking. That is the Judas mind-set. That's the way Judas thought. 'What a waste! Look what we could have done with all the money we could have gotten from selling that perfumed oil. Think of how many poor people we could have fed!'

Now, Judas didn't intend to do that... in fact, it wasn't even his oil, but it sounded good...and Judas was probably surprised and taken aback when Jesus complimented Mary on what she had done.

Now, the point of the story is simply this: sometimes it's O.K. to be extravagant. That's Mary's mind-set. If you lived strictly by the Judas mind-set, you would have no Spire on the church, no flowers on the altar, no artwork, no robes for the choir, no fine organ, no beautiful weddings. Your daughter would come to you and say, "I'm in love and I'm so happy... I want to get married." And you would say, "Well, why don't you just elope? It's much cheaper. It would be wasteful to have a wedding." But the Mary mind-set says, "Sometimes in the name of love and kindness and gratefulness, it's O.K. Indeed, it's beautiful to be extravagant." Let me show you what I mean.

I. It's O.K. To Be Extravagant In Our Generosity

That's what Mary was doing. It was a beautiful act of sacrificial generosity. I heard about a woman who was a "reverse tither." She lived on ten per cent of her income and gave away 90% to worthy causes...to her church and to Methodist schools and colleges, and orphanages and hospitals. She was extravagant in her generosity and she was one of the happiest persons you'll ever meet.

Some years ago, there was a small tribe of Native Americans who lived in the state of Mississippi. They lived along the banks of a very swift and dangerous river. The current was so strong that if somebody accidentally fell in, they would likely be swept away to their death downstream. One day this tribe was attacked by another hostile Indian tribe. They found themselves literally with their backs up against the treacherous river. They were greatly outnumbered. Their only chance for escape was to cross the current, which would mean sure death for the children, the elderly, the weak, and the ill and the injured...and likely death for many of the strong.

The leaders of the tribe huddled up to devise a plan. The logical thing, the reasonable thing, the expedient thing, the sensible thing was to leave the weak ones behind. They were going to be killed anyway... why risk losing the strong in a futile effort to save the others? That was the rational answer but they couldn't do it! Instead, they chose to be extravagant in their generosity... and they decided that those who were strong would pick up the weaker ones and put them on their shoulders. So, the little children, the elderly, those who were ill or wounded, were all carried on the backs of the stronger. With great fear, they waded out into the rapid waters of the river and they were met with a great surprise. To their astonishment, they discovered that the weight on their shoulders enabled them to keep their footing through the treacherous current and to make it safely

to the other side. Their own extravagant generosity saved them. What they did was not the reasonable thing to do, but it was the right thing to do.

The point is: If you who are strong and comfortable and well-fed, will reach out in generosity and help somebody in need, you will be surprised to discover that the life you save may also be your own. In words and action, Jesus taught us that sometimes it's O.K. to be extravagant in our generosity.

II. It's O.K. To Be Extravagant In Our Gratitude

Maybe that's what Mary was doing that day in Bethany - expressing her indescribable thanksgiving to Jesus. Sometimes words just aren't big enough and perhaps this extravagant act was her way of trying to say "thank you" to her Lord for all that He had done for them... and for the most recent act of calling her brother Lazarus out of the grave.

Let me share with you a wonderful story about a woman who was known far and wide for her grateful spirit. Even when she was diagnosed with terminal illness and told that she only had three months to live, still she maintained that twinkle in her eye, that terrific sense of humour, and that radiant spirit of gratitude. She went to see her pastor to plan her memorial service, and with a laugh she told him, "Don't you make this a sombre or sad occasion or I'll come back to haunt you! I've had a great life and I am so thankful for so many things, so let's concentrate on making this a celebration of my life in this world and the next."

Together, she and her pastor selected the hymns and the scriptures and then she said, "Oh yes, there's one more thing... I want to help you with your message." "How's that?" asked the minister. And she said, "I want to be buried with a fork in my right hand." The pastor blanched a bit and she said, "Are you shocked by that request?" "Curious," replied the minister.

The woman went on to explain: "In all my years in the church I have attended so many eating meetings... dinners, brunches, luncheons, potluck suppers... and my favourite part was when they were clearing the tables after the main course and someone would lean over and say, 'You can keep your fork.' That was my favourite part because I knew that meant that something better was coming! I was so grateful for what I had already had and now something better was coming!"

"So, when people come to the funeral home and see me there, they are going to say, 'What's with the fork? What's with the fork?' ... And then at the service you can get up and tell my story... and you can tell them for me that I am so grateful for what I've already had... but I'm keeping my fork because I know that something even better is coming!"

Let me ask you something:

- Do you have that kind of victorious spirit?
- Do you have that kind of deep faith?
- Do you have that kind of extravagant gratefulness?

If not, why not? Because Jesus taught us that it's O.K. to be extravagant in our generosity and in our gratitude.

III. Finally, it's O.K. To Be Extravagant In Our Graciousness

One thing is clear; whatever meanings scholars may attach to Mary's act of anointing Jesus with precious oil, it was without question an act of love and kindness and graciousness.

Let me tell you about Tess. Tess was a precocious eight-year-old little girl. One day she heard her mum and dad talking in a serious and sombre tone about her little brother, Andrew. Tess didn't understand everything that they were saying, but she got the gist: Her little brother, Andrew, was very, very sick and they were completely out of money. They would have to move out of their house and move into a small apartment because Mum and Dad didn't have enough money for the doctor bills and the house payment. On top of that, only a very expensive surgery could save Andrew now... and they could not find anyone to lend them the money. Just then, Tess heard her dad say to her tearful mother in whispered desperation, "Only a miracle can save Andrew now."

Tess ran to her room, pulled out a glass jelly jar from its hiding place in her closet. She poured out all the change on the floor and counted it carefully. She then put the change back in the jar, put the jar under her arm, slipped out the back door and ran down to the Rexall Drug Store six blocks away. The pharmacist was talking to a man intently and at first he didn't notice Tess standing there. She waited patiently for a while and then dramatically cleared her throat, but still, no luck - the pharmacist did not see her. Finally, Tess got his attention by taking a quarter out of her jelly jar and tapping it on the glass counter. That did it. The pharmacist noticed her and said, "Just a minute. I'm talking to my brother from Chicago whom I haven't seen for ages."

"Well," said Tess, "I want to talk to you about my brother. He's really, really sick - and I want to buy a miracle. His name is Andrew and he has something growing inside his head and my daddy says only a miracle can save him now. So... how much does a miracle cost? I have the money here to pay for it. It's all that I have saved. If it isn't enough, I will get the rest. Just tell me how much a miracle costs."

The pharmacist's brother was a well-dressed man. He stooped down and asked Tess, "What kind of miracle does your brother need?"

"I don't know," Tess replied, with her eyes welling up. "I just know he's really sick and Mummy says he needs an operation. But my parents can't pay for it, so I want to use my money."

"How much do you have?" asked the man from Chicago.

"One dollar and eleven cents!" Tess said proudly. "It's all the money I have in the world, but I can get some more if I need to."

"Well, you are in luck," the man said with a smile. "One dollar and eleven cents is the exact price of a miracle for little brothers."

He took the money in one hand and with the other he took hold of her mitten and said, "Take me to where you live. I want to see your brother and meet your parents. Let's see if I have the kind of miracle you need."

That well-dressed man from Chicago was Dr. Carlton Armstrong who just happened to be a noted neurosurgeon. The operation was successfully completed without charge... and it wasn't long until Andrew was home again and doing well. Tess' mum and dad were so grateful. They were talking one

night about the chain of events that had saved Andrew's life. "That surgery," her mum said, "was a real miracle." And then she said, "I just wonder how much it would have cost."

Tess smiled. She knew exactly how much a miracle cost... one dollar and eleven cents... plus, the skill and graciousness of a great doctor... and of course, the gracious, sacrificial love of an eight-year-old big sister!

Someone might say, "Well, it was only one dollar and eleven cents"... but, it was all she had! She gave all she had to save her little brother... and that's an extravagant gift!

Isn't that a great story? It's powerful because it reminds us in a dramatic way that the spirit of Christ can empower and enable us to be extravagant in our generosity, to be extravagant in our gratitude, and to be extravagant in our graciousness.

What should we expect of a **healing** ministry at the end of the 20th century? Will people hobble down to the chancel on crutches, then fling them away after prayer and anointing and run back up the aisle? Or will **healing** be more gradual? Both, probably. Our task is simply to join in faith and prayer and love and EXPECT SOMETHING TO HAPPEN. There will be times when, despite all our prayers and anointing, **healing** does not come in the way we ask - sometimes there has been too much physical damage, and God's most gracious act will be to let life mercifully end. Those decisions are not ours; rather they are rightfully in the hands of a caring and loving God.

There is much to learn about our ministry of **healing** because the subject has been so neglected for so long. Of course, we can study the subject to death and use our incomplete work as an excuse for inaction (or we might be very Presbyterian and turn it over to a committee). No. If the church is to regain its **healing** touch, the church has to, as the commercial says, JUST DO IT! Members and friends are encouraged to request **healing** when they need it. Services of **healing** will be included on the calendar in the same way we schedule Sunday school or Youth Fellowship or Presbyterian Women or anything else.

Please be aware that scripture does not reserve this **healing** work to a certain favoured few. There is no question that some individuals DO have a particular gift, but the ministry is committed to the CHURCH - it is the CHURCH that is the body of Christ, Christ's arms and legs; it is the church that lays hands on the sick and anoints with oil. Just as in any other area of our work, we are in this together.

The Sequoia trees of California tower as much as 300 feet above the ground. Strangely, these giants have unusually shallow root systems that reach out in all directions to capture the greatest amount of surface moisture. Seldom will you see a redwood standing alone, because high winds would quickly uproot it. That is why they grow in clusters. Their intertwining roots provide support for one another against the storms. When WE gather together, we provide similar support. Pain and suffering and illness come to all of us. But, just like those giant Sequoia trees, we can be supported in those difficult times by the knowledge that we have one another; we are not alone.

In a few minutes, we will intertwine our spiritual, mental and physical roots in a special way. Some among us are here with needs for **healing**. Our work will be (and make no mistake, it will be work) to join our hearts and minds and wills with each one who comes for anointing. We will come with faith - not the kind of faith that professes adherence to certain dogmas, but the same faith that Jesus called for from patients and family and friends, the same faith found in one very desperate woman

so long ago - faith in **SOMEBODY** to get something done. Our faith will help us to **EXPECT SOMETHING TO HAPPEN!** I am convinced that spiritual and emotional barriers to divine **healing** will be broken down when **ALL** of us are united in faith that anticipates something wonderful.

The spiritual power that Jesus gave to heal is still with us. Now, as we begin a new year, let us resolve to use it in his name and to his glory.