

**The Gospel Of Extravagance**  
**John 18:1-8**  
**Preached by Rev. Dr. Harry Cahill**  
**Babcock Presbyterian Church**  
**Sunday, March 21, 2010**

After coming through a long hard winter, suddenly without warning spring started busting out all over. We're beginning to notice buds on the trees and spring flowers popping up through left over autumn leaves. Cold gusts of wind are turning into warmer gentle breezes. New life emerging from the dead of winter!

Just as spring seems to be suddenly breaking out, here comes Holy Week just as suddenly, even if you've been attentively praying your way through Lent. Believe it or not friends, next Sunday is Passion Sunday, the start of Holy Week, the last leg of Jesus' journey to the cross.

For the past four Sundays, in each of the assigned gospel readings, one of the consistent themes has been the growing divide between Jesus and the religious establishment, represented by the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

These religious leaders were adamant about protecting and keeping what they consider to be the bones and sinew of the Jewish faith, the Law of Moses, against what they perceived to be Jesus' total disregard for their time-honored traditions.

But nothing was farther from the truth. "I didn't come to abolish the law," Jesus assured them, "but to fulfill it." For Jesus, wiping out the teachings of the Jewish scriptures would be like throwing out the baby with the bath water. Jesus wasn't about killing the Law of Moses, but breathing new life into it.

And apparently he was successful. Remember what the simple folks said, about Jesus? "This man has authority, unlike the scribes and Pharisees." Evidently their religious leaders were stuck on the nuts and bolts of religion without providing the faithful deeper spiritual insights that opened the portals of heaven. They taught, "Think and act like us," but most people didn't want to think and act like them, because just enough of them appeared to be one dimensional, and even hypocritical.

Does that mean all of the religious leaders were too religious and self-satisfied for their own good? Certainly not. But isn't it true? No matter what group of people you're talking about, it's always the loudest and brashest know-it-alls who, by default, become the group's public face.

Unfortunately, trying to disprove a negative, that is, all Christians are one dimensional, judgmental and hypocritical is impossible unless you intentionally strive to be Christ-like in the way you live. And I believe this morning's gospel story shows us how to be effective and genuine witnesses for Christ and his Gospel.

By this point in John's Gospel, Jesus, as far as the religious establishment was concerned, became public enemy number one. His teachings and miracles finally drove the Temple's ruling council, to plan his arrest and execution.

Now, it was six days before the Passover. Already Jerusalem was buzzing with pilgrims anticipating this Passover would be historic hoping Jesus of Nazareth on that High Holy Day, would publicly proclaim himself the Messiah and usher in the new Kingdom. Naturally the atmosphere was increasingly expectant and tense, making the religious establishment feel especially vulnerable and therefore dangerous.

Aware he was putting himself in harm's way Jesus stopped in the village of Bethany, just a stone's throw from Jerusalem, to visit his good friend Lazarus, also on the High Priest's hit list, because Jesus, quite recently and publicly raised Lazarus from the dead. For the temple leaders that was the last straw! Afraid the Romans wouldn't tolerate Jesus' messianic pretensions the High Priest Caiaphas famously decided, "...it is better...to have one man die for all the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." (John 11:50) Ironically Caiaphas was more prophetic than he knew.

Anyway, Jesus was having lunch with Lazarus and his sisters when suddenly, Mary the younger sister poured a pound of expensive perfume over Jesus' feet.

Immediately there was outrage over this extravagant waste of money, but it came from Judas, who was embezzling funds and lining his own pockets. Even so, his objections seemed reasonable, maybe even understated. Let's be honest. Mary was being extravagant and wasteful.

But Jesus appreciated the gesture. "Leave her alone. She bought it...for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." (John 12:8)

Mary's extravagant gesture and Jesus' response provide essential clues to being good and faithful disciples for Christ and his Gospel.

Whether or not she fully understood her actions, love motivated Mary to pour that expensive perfume on Jesus' feet.

On numerous occasions beforehand, Jesus warned the disciples he was going to Jerusalem to die, and now Mary was led to do something so, in a beautiful way, Mary entered into her Lord's suffering by doing something extravagant.

Last Sunday's sermon told the story of the Prodigal Son and his even more prodigal father. Remember the definition for Prodigal? "1) recklessly, wasteful or extravagant 2) lavish in giving or yielding." The Father poured lavish, extravagant love on his recklessly extravagant son. Likewise, God pours lavish extravagant grace on recklessly extravagant sinners. That's the lesson of that parable. But there's more: as God extravagantly loves us, the only practical way to return God's love is by being extravagantly loving to one another.

Take your cue from Mary. Let yourself become an extravagant living sacrifice for Christ. Often we criticize celebrities for their extravagant excesses, so Judas' objections seem justified, until you realize Mary's extravagance wasn't wasteful, but essential.

"Leave Mary alone. She bought it... for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Jesus was referring to Deuteronomy 15:11, one of the Laws of Moses he didn't come to abolish. Listen carefully to the entire verse:

"There will always be poor people in the land." That's the part of the verse we remember. But there's more. "Therefore I command you to be open handed toward...the poor and needy in your land." Deuteronomy 15:11)

Certainly on Good Friday we remember Jesus died for the sins of the world. He "took the rap" for us. Christ suffered so we wouldn't have to.

But such an act of sacrificial love demands a heartfelt response to Christ's sacrifice and it's found in that passage from Deuteronomy. "There will always be poor in the land. Therefore I command you be open handed toward the poor and needy..."

At the heart of the Christian Gospel are the twin themes of sacrifice and love, "Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13)

Likewise, the Apostle Paul touched on the same theme in his letter to the Romans, "I appeal to you...to present your bodies as a living sacrifice...which is your spiritual worship." (Romans 12:1) You put flesh on the Gospel when you follow Christ's example and live sacrificially, being open handed to the least of these, the poorest of the poor, be it materially or spiritually or both.

Never let yourself think Jesus' crucifixion was just about you getting your own "Get Out of Hell Free Card." Calvary must go far deeper than that to have any significant impact on your quality of life. You see, you are expected to stand by the cross, and enter into his suffering. Think of it this way. When you prayerfully consider the suffering Christ endured for all the sins of the world and you also recall his motivation, ("Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends"), how can you not be open handed in your dealing with one another, especially those in greatest need?

Mary broke open the jar and poured the perfume on Jesus' feet knowing within days his life would be broken opened, spilled out and poured over us so we may gain eternal life and then be empowered to allow ourselves be broken and spilled out as we offer up our lives and lay them down for Christ's friends, especially the least of these, because we, like Mary, are motivated by love.

Spring, like Holy Week and Good Friday comes suddenly and unexpected. Even so, continue on the last leg of your pilgrimage to Jerusalem to be with our Lord as he lays down his life for us all. And then wait upon our Lord, as he suffers and dies, only to realize his crucifixion, on so many different levels, wins our salvation in this life and in the life to come. Now we are free to love and serve God and our neighbor as together we enter the growing awareness of the coming Kingdom of God within and around us, making expressions of extravagant love possible.