

“Determining Value”
John 12:1-8; Isaiah 43:16-21

William G. Carter, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania, writing in the commentary, Feasting On the Word, tells about attending a stewardship conference where an ecumenical group of pastors gathered to discuss generosity. One of the speakers was giving the customary speech concerning offering a gift directly to God. But as the pastors began to yawn the presenter pulled out a \$100 bill, placed it in an ashtray, set it on fire, and prayed, “Lord, I offer this gift to you, and you alone.”

Carter writes that the reaction was electric. The pastors began to squirm in their chairs, watching that \$100 go up in smoke as if it was perfume. One preacher whispered that it was illegal to burn currency. Another murmured, “If he is giving money away, perhaps he has a few more.” Carter says there was nervous laughter all around the room.

Then the speaker said, “Do you not understand? I am offering it to God, and that means it is going to cease to be useful for the rest of us.” Carter called it an anxious moment.

There is something about extravagant generosity that makes us anxious, leads us to question its motives. And that is exactly what occurs in this morning’s scripture. Jesus returns to Bethany, the home of Mary and Martha, and their brother, Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead. It is the evening before what we now call Palm Sunday, six days prior to Jesus’ death. A dinner party is thrown for Jesus and his disciples likely to welcome Jesus and celebrate the recently resurrected Lazarus.

In preparation for the meal, Mary takes twelve ounces of costly ointment and anoints Jesus’ feet. She then wipes his feet with her hair. The gospel writer John tells us that the sweet fragrance of the perfume filled the whole house.

But Judas, who would later betray Christ, upon seeing this questions Mary, “Why was this perfume not sold for 300 denarii and the money given to the poor?” John relates that Judas asked this not because he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief. He carried the money purse for Jesus and the disciples and he would steal from it.

Jesus replies to Judas, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

In the year end issue of Newsweek magazine, editor Jon Meacham interviewed together present Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. Kissinger garnered Clinton’s approval when he said, “One of the problems of government is to separate the urgent from the important and make sure you’re dealing with the important and don’t let the urgent drive out the important.”

Judas was concerned with the urgent, while Mary gave attention to the important.

Like most biblical stories, this one functions on several theological levels. One purpose is to point to Jesus' coming death. Jesus notes that Mary bought the ointment for his burial. In the hot, muggy, Palestinian climate it was typical to anoint the head of a guest, to bring a fresh and pleasant odor to a room. Yet, here, Mary anoints Jesus' feet. This act shows Mary's humility and the importance of Jesus, that even his feet are worthy. But it also is a prophetic act, for one usually only anoints the feet of a dead person.

But for the Church through the centuries, and our purposes, the most striking element of the story occurs at the end. Judas accuses Mary of wastefulness by anointing Jesus with a 300 denarii pound of perfume. The average daily wage for a worker was one denarius a day. So, Mary was anointing Jesus with a full year's salary worth of perfume. Otherwise, whatever your yearly salary is, that is what Mary was putting on Jesus' feet.

Judas covers his greed by condemning the anointing instead of giving the money to the poor. Yet, even if we take away Judas' ulterior motive, the question still strikes a chord. Extravagance can feel like waste. So, how do we understand this incident?

First, it is important to clear up Jesus' statement that "you always have the poor with you..." He is actually quoting the first section of Deuteronomy 15:11, whose second part says, "I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and the needy neighbor in your land.'" So, Jesus in no way is relinquishing our duty to the poor and needy. In fact, he is reiterating it.

But Jesus is also noting that true love is always extravagant and never counts the cost. One of the reasons we so often fail in love, in relationships, in Christian commitment, is that we are always counting the cost. Extravagance performed in love is not done to get something, but to say something. Loving extravagance says this is really important to me. This is worth all I have, and all I am.

The story calls each of us to ask what is the filter we use for evaluation of our actions, our life, our faith? Judas witnessed an act of extravagant love toward Christ and called it waste. He reacted through the lens of how that act would affect him.

Loving extravagance can seem like such a waste when performed in generosity, in kindness, in faith. Next to Jesus, maybe Wordsworth said it best in his sonnet entitled, "Inside King's College, Cambridge":

"Give all thou canst; Heaven rejects the lore
of nicely calculated less or more."

Are you and I always calculating the cost when it comes to friends, to family, to Jesus?

Jim asked his friend Tony whether he had bought his wife anything for Valentine's Day. "Yes," came the immediate reply from Tony, "I've bought her a belt and a bag."

That was very kind of you," Jim noted. "I hope she appreciates the thought."

"So do I," Tony replied. "And hopefully now the vacuum cleaner will work better."

When you and I examine how we respond to God's extravagant blessings, his love and forgiveness, are we buying expensive perfume or belts and bags?

"Determining Value"

What was the value of Jesus? For Judas, not 300 denarii.

Today, we will celebrate the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, symbolically partaking of Christ's body and blood, asking for and receiving the love and forgiveness accomplished through his death and resurrection. Mary believed this love and forgiveness was worth everything she possessed. For her, the expensive perfume was not a waste, but a loving offering of herself to the One who brought joy and purpose to her life. True love is always extravagant.

In this sacrament, Christ extravagantly offers himself to you. Your response to him will illustrate what you think that is worth.

Ludwig L. Weaver, Jr.
Westminster Presbyterian Church
February 7, 2010