

The Fragrance of Grace

L. Gregory Jones, Professor of Theology at Duke Divinity School, tells the story of how, years ago, he was invited to preach at an Episcopal church in another city. He decided to preach on the anointing of Jesus by Mary at Bethany, the story I just read. The church wrote him and asked him to send them his title, which he did. Sunday morning came and he sat up front, robed and ready to preach, reading through the bulletin before the service began. Running his eyes down the bulletin, he came across the following introduction: "This morning, we welcome to our pulpit our guest speaker, His Extravagant Holiness the Rev. Dr. L. Gregory Jones."

His extravagant holiness. Quite an honorific, even for a theological professor! But fitting for a title of a sermon on today's gospel lesson. For, as with the father in last week's parable, what we are dealing with this morning is a case of utter extravagance. The whole scene, everything that Mary did, was excessive, extravagant, effusive. Maybe even a little provocative.

Consider the scene. Jesus enters the city of Bethany for the last time. He is passing through on his way to the cross. On his way, Jesus has a dinner party with his close friends in Bethany: Mary, Martha, and their brother, Lazarus. No sooner has dinner begun than Mary appears and kneels at Jesus' feet. She breaks the neck off of an alabaster jar containing the very-sweet smelling perfume. Then, she loosens her hair, letting it down—which no respectful woman would do in the presence of men, particularly in the presence of a religious leader. And she pours the sweet-smelling perfume all over Jesus' feet. (In Israel, kings were anointed with oil on their heads, but in public you didn't smear sweet-smelling oil on someone's feet, particularly someone to whom you were not married!) Then she touches him, caressing his feet—a single woman rubbing an unmarried man's feet!—also not done, not even among friends. And finally with her hair she wipes Jesus' feet—totally inexplicable—the bizarre end to an all-around bizarre act. An extravagant, sensuous, outrageously physical expression of love toward Jesus. Indeed, breaking open the jar, pouring out the perfume, rubbing it all over Jesus—the woman was symbolically giving herself as a bride to Jesus. Such costly perfume was a family treasure, to be saved for her wedding day, to be used only for her bridegroom. Shockingly, she brings it instead to Jesus. This is not only an unconventional act; this is a transgressive one to the minds of the other guests.

So, no wonder they were shocked. You can imagine all eyes that had been on Mary were quickly turned to Jesus, to see how this religious leader, this "holy man," was going to respond to the woman's scandalous behavior. When Jesus doesn't do anything to stop it, and the other guests seemingly struck speechless, Judas pipes up, complaining of the waste. "How could you let her pour this expensive oil down the drain when it could be used for more practical, more... charitable ends?" You know people like this, those who sneer at anything that smacks of the extravagant, stingy people who like to cite religious or idealistic reasons when the real motive is self-protection or self-aggrandizement.

And John makes it pretty clear that Judas is not the good guy in this story. And yet, Judas does have a point. Sometimes extravagance is foolish, wasteful, and just wrong. Think of huge cars that get ten miles to a gallon or week-long luxury cruises to the Caribbean that will set you back just a little over a million dollars.

Mary's extravagance wasn't nearly so ridiculous or obscene as a million-dollar yacht excursion, but it was certainly extravagant. You see, a jar of nard like that would have fetched a price of 300 denarii, 300 silver coins, enough money to feed a poor family for a year. It would be like someone making minimum wage going out and dumping \$20,000 on perfume! And then pouring it down the drain. At least that's how Judas and likely many others saw it.

But there are times when extravagance is something other than foolish or wrong, when extravagance is beyond right and proper, when it's true. And this was apparently one of those times, for Jesus received Mary's gift and commended her. In Mark's version of the story, Jesus rebukes Judas, saying, "Lay off her... She's done a beautiful thing for me. Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her." And of course, here we are two thousand years later, in a place half way around the world, telling her story.

Now, Jesus called her act of devotion "good," or better "beautiful," the Greek word *kalos* means both. What Mary did was good and beautiful. What the disciples deemed a waste, Jesus called beautiful. So Mary's "wrong" act is the right one, according to Jesus, while Judas' "right" argument is the wrong one. Such is the case often with Jesus, as you know—the outwardly righteous get it wrong and the ne'er-do-wells get front row seating.

So, what's the difference then between extravagance that is foolish and just wrong, and extravagance that is beautiful and true? Looking at Mary's act, it was clear that what she did was an act of worship. It wasn't about her. She had forgotten herself in love and devotion. On the other hand, and even though he professed concern for the poor, for Judas, it was really all about himself. Acts of extravagance in which we lose ourselves, forget ourselves are seldom wrong. But even acts of charity, when they are really only about us and how we will appear to others, are seldom right.

Mary's act was beautiful, and loving, and true, though likely she didn't understand why it was so. Most likely, her act was a token of moving, profound gratitude to Jesus for restoring her dear brother to life. It was an outpouring of love. She was giving the best she has to the one who brought her brother back from the dead. Overcome with faith and joy, she literally throws herself at the Savior, falling at his feet, anointing them with precious perfume and wiping them with her hair. As expressions of devotion go, it doesn't get more complete than this total surrender to love.

And yet, it goes deeper than that. Whatever Mary thought about what she did, and whatever anyone else in the room thought about it, Jesus took it as something more, as a message from God—not the hysterical ministrations of an old maid gone sweetly mad but the carefully performed *act of a prophet*. Her act may be, for her, one of gratitude, love and devotion and no more. But it becomes, as Jesus himself says, a prophetic act, a sign, an act that has meaning

beyond the moment. It enacted a truth that wasn't plain to those who saw it, the truth about Jesus' imminent death, his passion.

You see, not even the pungent fragrance of that expensive perfume could cover up the odor of his impending death. Dark clouds were gathering. Ever since Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, Jesus had been a marked man, as good as dead himself, a "dead man walking." And his time was nearly up.

Mary's anointing of Jesus was an anointing for his burial. And while her behavior may have seemed strange to those standing around, carrying on as she did, letting her hair down and falling all over Jesus, it was no more strange than what the prophets who went before her did—eating scrolls, breaking pots, marrying prostitutes, wearing dirty underwear for weeks. Prophets do weird things like that. They act out the message they carry, the truth that no one else can see, and those standing around either write them off as crazy or fall silent before the disturbing news they bring from God.

Mary breaks a jar of perfume as a portend of the death of the Son of God. She pours out her expensive ointment, as God will soon pour out his own Son, and there will be no holding back. There will be nothing *economical* about Jesus' death, just as there has been nothing economical about his life. In him, the extravagance of God's love is made flesh. In him, the excessiveness of God's mercy is made manifest.

This "bottle of fragrant perfume," that is Jesus, will not be held back to be kept and admired. The precious substance of his life will not be saved. It will be broken open, offered and used, at great expense. It will be raised up and then poured out for the life of the world, emptied to the last drop.

Before that happens, though, Jesus will gather his friends together one last time. There, at another banquet, around another supper table, with most of the same people present here, Jesus will strip, tie a towel around his waist, get down on his own hands and knees and wash *his disciples'* feet. Then he will give them a new commandment: Love one another, as I have loved you. Some of the disciples will argue with him, as Judas does now, while others will wonder if he has lost his mind. Evidently forgotten by the disciples will be the sight of Mary bending over Jesus' feet like that, Mary who knew how to respond to Jesus without being told, the one who acted out his last, new commandment before he ever gave it. I wonder, Did any of those disciples catch the scent then of her perfume, all that spike nard that she had poured out on Jesus and remember her act of love, her prophetic anointing?

It's not beyond the realm of possibility, the fragrance of her act lingering so. For, practically speaking, we are not far from Calvary, only a week away, and you can imagine such a strong perfume as Mary used would have lasted a long time. Everywhere Jesus went—as he rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, as he cleansed the Temple, as he gathered with his disciples in the Upper Room, as he appeared before the High Priest and Pilate, the fragrance of Mary's perfume likely still lingered faintly as a reminder of Mary's great love. And on the cross, the only earthly possession Christ wore would be the very aroma of the perfume Mary poured upon him. Then, perhaps—just maybe—after Jesus had breathed his last and a handful of his disciples were taking

him down from the cross, might they have caught, beneath the heavy, sick stink of death, a whiff of that sweet fragrance? Would that scent then have taken them back to that night in Bethany, to that night when Mary, with her extravagant devotion, prophesied Jesus' own act of love? Would they, like Judas, have thought it unnecessarily excessive, a huge waste? Or would they have recognized his death for what it was—an act so extravagantly gracious, so over the top, so effusively loving that it could only come from God? The fragrance of love poured from Jesus that dark Friday. You can catch a whiff of it still today. Thanks be to God!