
The Urgency of Extravagance

John 12:1-8

A sermon preached in Page Auditorium on March 13, 2016

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Several years ago, I was attending an academic conference where one of the speakers had made a powerful appeal for Christians to care for the poor. After the session I struck up a conversation with a Maryknoll priest. He asked me who I thought best exemplified the mission of the church in the world, Mother Teresa or Dom Helder Camara?" Both, of course, were faithful Christians, living exemplary lives: Camara, the saintly Archbishop of Brazil, whose fearless advocacy for human rights and democracy gained worldwide attention and recognition, and Mother Teresa, known for founding the Missionaries of Charity, who lived and ministered among the poorest of the poor in the slums of Calcutta. Yet these two great Christians did have different strategies for addressing the problem. Archbishop Camara insisted that Christians must combat the unjust structural causes of poverty, while Mother Teresa chose to practice acts of charity toward the poor. Suspecting that my conversation partner, as a member of the Maryknoll order, was committed to the liberation theology favored by Camara, I responded with a grin, "Mother Theresa." He proceeded to lecture me about the ineffectiveness of charity in addressing the underlying systemic causes of poverty. And he said that he had once told Mother Teresa the same thing while they were sharing a breakfast of bananas. "What did she do?" I asked him. He smiled, and said, "She took away my banana!"

The priest was making an argument made more forcefully by Christopher Hitchens, who claimed that Mother Teresa glorified poverty for her own ends, and rather than reducing it she actually provided justification for preserving the institutions and beliefs that allowed poverty to exist (*The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice*, London: Verso, 1995). Malcolm Muggeridge tells a very different story in his book (and film) *Something Beautiful for God* (New York: Harper, 1971). Muggeridge says that he got the idea for the book and movie title from a letter he received from Mother Teresa. After they decided to move forward with the project, she wrote him to say, "Now let us do something beautiful for God." It was such a lovely phrase, Muggeridge says it was an obvious title, because doing something beautiful for God was what her life was all about (*Something Beautiful*, 125).

Conversations like these seem to echo the comments by dinner guests on the actions of Mary in the Gospel reading for today. John describes the scene as occurring in Bethany, six days before the Jewish Passover. Bethany was a small village, located on the Mount of Olives, just two miles east of Jerusalem. It was the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, where Jesus was a frequent guest. They were all present at the dinner, but on this occasion, the meal was not in their home. John's Gospel actually does not say whose house it was. The Gospels of Mark and Matthew tell us that the dinner was in the home of Simon the leper (Mk 14:3; Mt 26:6)), which has led some commentators to speculate that perhaps Simon was the father of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. But John omits any reference to the host of the party.

Instead, John focuses the story on a strange incident. While Martha is busy serving and Lazarus is reclining with the other dinner guests, Mary takes a pound of expensive perfume, made of real nard, and pours it on Jesus' feet. No one actually seems to know exactly what kind of oil it was, but the Gospel is careful to describe it in such a way that we know what she was doing with it, for it says, she "anointed" his feet (Jn 12:3). Now it would have been understandable and might even have been expected if she had poured the oil on his head, but to anoint his feet was very odd. And even stranger, as soon as she pours it out, she begins to wipe it off, and not with a cloth, but with her hair. Even more strange they recognize the smell. It is the scent of a funeral. It is odor of death.

And the fragrance is so strong and so thick that it fills the entire house with its heavy aroma. Mark's Gospel is even more extreme in its description. It says that witness of Mary's act would fill not just the house, but the entire world (Mk 14:9). But there was no doubt, the spectacle and the smell of Mary's act was impossible to ignore.

The criticism is swift and harsh. Judas denounces what she has done as wasteful. He complains that she could have (indeed he implies she should have) sold the perfume, which he estimates was worth at least 300 pieces of silver. It was an extravagant waste, the equivalent of an entire year's wages for a working person. If she had sold the oil, at least then the money could be given to the poor, but her extravagant display has squandered even that possibility. But, then, John adds a parenthetical explanation that Judas was not really concerned about the poor at all. He was a thief. As the keeper of the common purse, if the oil had been sold, he would have kept the money for himself. John's observation takes what might have been read as a valid concern about "limited resources" or "good stewardship" and shows it to be a cruel and cynical excuse.

After the outburst by Judas, Jesus intervenes, and tells everyone to "Leave her alone" (Jn 12:7), for Mary seems to understand something they had all missed. She recognized that he was going to die, and she began to prepare his body for burial. John's Gospel has already given readers enough clues to see this coming. In the scene immediately before our text, the Sanhedrin was openly plotting to put Jesus to death (Jn 11:53). Word was out that they were seeking to arrest him (Jn 11:57). Mary understands. She sees the shadow of the cross falling over Jesus, and so she prepares him for his death that will soon follow. Her extravagant act was not expected under rabbinic law. It was not like almsgiving, an expected act of justice. Hers was an act of charity that went beyond what was required. She understood the urgency of the moment. In spite of looking foolish, in spite of appearing wasteful, in spite of criticism, she stepped forward and expressed her faith in an extravagant act of love. And it was something beautiful for God.

Jesus concludes by reminding them of words from the book of Deuteronomy, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me" (Jn 12:8; Deut 15:11). It is strange that these words have been used, or rather misused, as a cruel proof-text to justify a continuing neglect of the poor. But that is a smokescreen argument that, like Judas, conceals callous motives. Jesus did not intend to justify the lack of justice or charity due the poor. Nor did he mean to excuse selfish and greedy accumulation of personal wealth. For the full text of the verse he quotes from Deuteronomy reads: "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'" He is reminding them that the care for the poor is their duty, and they will have other opportunities to show that. But there would be no more chances for Mary, or for those gathered around the table that night. This was an urgent opportunity that would never come again. And Mary recognized the urgency of the moment, and she did something beautiful, something extravagant for God.

In his book on Mother Teresa, Muggeridge tells about a gift he once made to her ministry. Funds were always needed. And he assumed that his gift would be used for food or medicine. He was surprised when she wrote back to thank him, and informed him that she had purchased a chalice and ciborium for the worship of God. And then she explained, "So you will be daily on the altar close to the Body of Christ" (*Something Beautiful*, 36). Muggeridge noted that her action might be criticized along the same lines as Mary's outrageous act, but he confessed that it was a beautiful thing that gave him strength and comfort through the years.

If you keep up with the demographic reports on religion (and even if you do not), you know that the size of the Christian population, church membership, and worship attendance in the U.S. is declining, while the number of the *unaffiliated* (“the Nones”), the *disaffiliated* (“the Dones”), and the *differently* affiliated (the non-Christian faith groups) continues to grow. It is interesting to watch how churches are responding to the changing landscape. For many the answer seems to be that we need to learn how to be better stewards of our resources, to know how to do more with less. But if we were to take the Gospel story seriously, perhaps we do not need to learn how to become more efficient managers. Instead, perhaps it suggests that we need to learn how to be more extravagant givers.

In the Church of the Holy Trinity at Staunton Harold, in Leicestershire, England, there is a plaque with an inscription that reads: “In the year 1653 when all things sacred were throughout the nation either demolished or profaned, Sir Robert Shirley founded this Church, whose singular praise it is to have done the best things in the worst times.” For Shirley, a staunch Royalist, the defeat of the monarchy and the rise of the Commonwealth of Cromwell was the deferral, if not the loss of Shirley’s dreams. Yet despite disappointment and discouragement, he did something extravagant, something beautiful for God that has outlasted the changes of time.

As I tell that story, I cannot help but remember the dream of James Buchanan Duke, to build “a great towering church” on this campus between 1930 and 1932, at the beginning of the Great Depression. It was not exactly the best of times to take on such a venture, and yet he did something extravagant, something beautiful for God. Brothers and sisters: There never will be another opportunity like today. And so let us follow Mary’s example: Spend it all! Risk everything! Do not leave anything on the table! Because we will never have this chance again. May we be inspired today to do something lavish, something risky, something excessive, something big, something extravagant, something beautiful for God. Amen.