

## Extravagant

Did you ever watch “Chef on a Shoestring” on TV? I used to watch it on Saturday mornings. A few years back, it was a regular feature on one of the network morning shows. Each week, a well-known chef would show viewers how to plan and prepare a gourmet three-course company meal on a budget, including ingredients for each dish, along with the price of each ingredient. This dinner party fare looked totally delicious! But no one would call it extravagant.

The dinner party we hear about in this Sunday’s gospel text probably wasn’t extravagant, either. The reading suggests that this dinner for Jesus takes place at the home of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus—a family of adult siblings who live together in the village of Bethany. These three are longtime friends of Jesus. Close friends. Beloved friends.

Thanks to the Fourth Evangelist, you and I get to peek through the window at this Saturday night supper. As always, Martha serves up some wonderfully tasty dishes. This shared meal, this convivial table fellowship among intimate friends

should be as relaxed and comfortable as all those that have come before it.

Except that it's not. There's a different mood tonight. A poignant undercurrent. Because not too long before this gathering, brother Lazarus has been taken seriously ill. In this very house, Lazarus actually *died*. But Jesus has brought him back to life! And as a result, so many people have begun to follow Jesus that the chief priests and Pharisees—fearing a mass uprising and a harsh crackdown by the Roman authorities—have determined that Jesus must die.

So it's with a plot against his life that Jesus has returned to Bethany, only a couple of miles outside Jerusalem—the city he'll enter the very next day for the last time. And tonight—right here at table with them all—is Lazarus himself. So recently in the tomb—a living reminder of what's already taken place and what is still to come. Death is in the air. But those gathered around the table with Jesus? Even if at some level they *know* what lies ahead, most of them don't *want* to know. They're not prepared to process all that will happen.

After a time, the evening begins to wind down. As Martha starts clearing away the dishes, Mary quietly slips away for a

moment and comes back with a narrow jar. A jar containing a full *pound* of pure nard.

Now if you drive over to Columbiana Centre and stop by one of the department store fragrance counters, you probably won't find a scent labeled *Nard Number Five*. What you *will* find is that even a small fraction of *one* ounce of quality perfume sells at a high price point. In today's marketplace, the cost of *sixteen* ounces of perfume would be astronomical.

And it's no different in the first century. Nard is a rich, fragrant oil extracted from the aromatic root of a plant that grows in the distant high country of the Himalaya mountains. It's unbelievably expensive. This perfume of Mary's has a street value of three hundred denarii. It would take a day laborer almost a whole year to earn that much!

We're not told where or how Mary's obtained this scented treasure. But we strongly suspect that she must have been saving very carefully and for a very long time. Mary has sacrificed to acquire the costly perfume that she has reserved for this moment.

For while everyone's still at table, Mary does the unimaginable. Bringing out this rare and costly oil, she *pours* it

out onto the feet of the guest of honor. She doesn't apply only a sparing drop or two. No. She pours it out. Lavishly. Amid the stares and gasps of the astonished guests, she bathes the feet of Jesus. The fragrance is pleasing to Jesus. The perfume overpowers the lingering odor of death. And fills the whole house with its lovely, heady scent.

But afterward, the first sound we hear is the strident protest of the betrayer. *This woman's extravagance—there's no excuse for it! Why wasn't this perfume sold? he demands. Think of the things we could have done with that money—think of how many people in need it could have helped!*

Of course, had the money been put into the common purse, it would have been Judas himself who was helped—he would have helped himself *to* it. This Judas, whose actions proclaim that he really couldn't care less about the poor. This Judas, whose outburst elicits a rebuke from Jesus.

My sisters and brothers, you know how Jesus responds to Judas. *You'll always have the poor with you, but you won't always have me.* This statement might sound as though Jesus is inviting his followers to turn their backs on the disadvantaged and the downtrodden. But nothing could be farther from the

truth! Throughout the gospels, Jesus charges his disciples—past and present—with caring for those in need. With feeding. With clothing. With healing. When he says, *you'll always have the poor with you*, Jesus is lamenting the fact that human creatures continue to develop systems and structures that divide societies into haves and have-nots.

As long as people like Judas inhabit this world, so will people in need. As Scott Hoezee notes: “Yes, we can calculate and hoard life’s treasures and be...self-serving...and we can chalk it all up as being the way of the world, good business, common sense, and any number of other things by which we prop up the status quo. And in doing so we will indeed increase the likelihood that we’ll always have the poor with us. What else could result?”

The author of Deuteronomy must have understood that greed and injustice perpetuate poverty. And when Jesus says, *you'll always have the poor with you*, he wants us to recall the words that are written there in the Law of Moses. *Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, [God] therefore commands you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor.”*

Open your hand! This Scripture resonates in the teaching of John Wesley. Who, in his sermon *On the Use of Money*, counsels: *Gain all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can.*

You know, I think that Mary of Bethany knows how to gain. And how to save. And how to give. And after she gives her Lord all that she's gained, all that she's saved, she does something that women in her society just don't do in the company of men. She loosens her hair—amid more shocked stares. Amid more gasps. Mary lets down the shining dark hair that cascades below her waist. Full. Thick. Flowing. Luxuriant. And then, bending low, she uses her hair to dry the feet of Jesus. She serves him with all that she has.

She shows us how to give what's valued. She shows us how to give what's costly. She shows us how to give our very selves.

In Mary of Bethany, you and I see a portrait of just the kind of disciple we would like to be. Just the kind of disciple we long to be. Just the kind of disciple we strive to be. Like Mary, disciples spend time with Jesus. Like Mary, disciples listen to his grace-filled words. Like Mary, disciples understand who Jesus is—the One with power over even death itself, the One who's restored Mary's brother to life. Like Mary, as an

expression of gratitude, as an act of love, disciples place our treasure at the feet of Jesus. Like Mary, rather than offering Jesus something that cost us nothing, disciples offer him our best. Like Mary, we follow Jesus the Christ. Like Mary, we know that some may object and criticize. But to disciples, raised eyebrows and disapproving stares mean little. Loving Christ means everything.

Mary loves extravagantly. And therefore, she gives extravagantly. No expense is too great. Nothing she has is too costly to give. You and I live amid a consumer-culture that urges us to accumulate rather than to give. And there's no shortage of material possessions to accumulate. The apostle Paul tells believers at Philippi that these kinds of things are worthless. That the things of real value are gaining Christ Jesus and being found in him. That the thing of surpassing value is knowing him.

Mary knows Jesus. She may or may not know what the next week will bring. But in the events of this evening at Bethany, we catch glimpses of what's to come. When Mary bathes the feet of Jesus, we're reminded that in just a few short days he will wash the feet of his disciples and ask them to do the same for each other. When we hear of Mary's sacrificial love,

we're reminded of his commandment—given shortly before his arrest—to love one another as he has loved us. When we hear of the presence of Judas, we're reminded of the betrayal of Jesus into the hands of sinners. And at this dinner, as Mary anoints her Lord with costly perfume, we're reminded of a later anointing. A *final* anointing.

We're reminded of the most costly sacrifice of all. The sacrifice of this One who gives his very self to be poured out. Not sparingly. Not frugally.

But generously! Lavishly! Every single priceless drop of this One who is the most precious offering of all. This One who loves you with the most extravagant love of all.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Christ, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.