

Love is a Spendthrift

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 5th Sunday in Lent, March 12, 1989. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:8-14; John 12:1-8.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

It was just six days before the Passover. Passover is the festival when Jews remember when the Angel of the Lord passed over Egypt. The children of Israel were slaves in Egypt. God was about to deliver them through Moses. God commanded Pharaoh to let his people go. When Pharaoh refused, God warned that the Angel of Death would pass over Egypt and slay the first born child. But with the warning God gave a promise. If each household would kill a lamb and smear its blood on the two side door posts and on the upper door post of their houses the angel would pass over that home and the child would be saved. Passover is observed annually by Jews even today. Jesus was killed at Passover time. We believe, in fact, that ~~Jesus is our Passover Lamb. We believe that his blood in some mysterious~~ way protects us from death and judgment.

Six days before his death "Jesus came to Bethany". Bethany, where he'd often visited with his dear friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Bethany, where he had performed his greatest miracle of all by raising Lazarus from the dead. "And there they made him a supper in his honor." I find something very cozy and warm and homey about those words. Some of my warmest and most cherished memories take me back to dinner tables and friends and family. It's not at all surprising that the most cherished and warmest memories of Christians take us back to a supper held in honor of Jesus, where we remember his death and enjoy his presence.

Many people came to that dinner in Bethany. Probably the whole town turned out. Martha was there serving the meal. Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead, was there. The disciples were there. And Mary was there. There are a number of women named Mary in the New Testament.

There was Mary, the mother of Jesus. There was Mary Magdalene. And there was this Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. She loved Jesus deeply. Jesus had raised her brother from the dead. But not only that, Jesus was the only man who had ever treated her with dignity and respect.

And out of that deep love "Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped them with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment". The perfume was made from an herb grown only in the high pasture-land of the Himalayas, between Tibet and India. It was carried on camel-back through miles and miles of mountain passes. Because it was from a region so remote it was very expensive. One pound was worth 300 hundred denarii. A denarius was the standard daily wage. So Mary's perfume was worth nearly one whole year's wages. By today's values it would be worth twenty or thirty thousand dollars. Without a word Mary took this ointment and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped them with her hair.

Mary's act of devotion challenges and humbles me. Some one has said that worship and praise is the missing Jewel in Protestant worship. Worship! Praise! Think about why we come to the worship service. So often the worship service in Protestant churches becomes a lecture on the Bible. Or it becomes primarily an evangelistic service directed at those who aren't believers. Or it becomes a kind of pep-rally or pop-psychology seminar in which we're encouraged to think positively. Or it becomes a form of religious entertainment. The minister and the choir become the center of attention and the congregation is the audience. But in true Christian worship God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is the center of attention. Mary was at a dinner held in honor of Jesus. This service of worship is held in honor of the risen Lord. We're here to praise God:

Father, Son, Holy Spirit.

Notice that Mary's act of praise and worship goes beyond words. What she does, she does in silence. Her actions speak louder than words. We're so uncomfortable with silence, especially in worship. Last week when we were waiting for the ambulance to come for Clara we sat in silence. I felt uncomfortable and yet I felt that it was the most appropriate thing to do. Then I thought that there's next to no time for sitting silently in the presence of the Lord in our worship service. Every spare moment is filled so as not to waste any time. Maybe we can learn something *from Mary's* wasteful action, that silence isn't really wasted in the presence of the Lord.

To be able to sit in silence and enjoy another person's company is a mark of deep and true friendship. A love which has no silence sometimes has no depth in it. Think of a loving mother watching her children as they romp and play close by. Or watch a young man who has just become engaged, looking at his fiancée as she comes into the room. Mary did not have to say anything. Her love for Christ at this moment transcended words.

Notice also that giving is central to Mary's act of worship. So many of our prayers ask God for things, for healing, for blessings, for guidance. But our worship will be lacking something if it doesn't go beyond asking God for things. Our worship will be woefully lacking if we're hear only to get something. Our worship here on earth is to mirror the worship of heaven where the saints and angels sing, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing." "Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever."

When Mary took that pound of pure nard and poured it on the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair she was expressing the gratitude every Christian feels and longs to express in tangible forms.

Finally, Jesus connects this anointing of His body with His death. This anointing points to the death of Jesus. It points to Jesus, the Christ, the anointed one, whose life will soon be wasted on the cross for our salvation. Mary's act of devotion mirrors God's love for us in Christ in three ways. First, Mary poured out her expensive perfume on the feet of Jesus out of deep *love*. It reminds us that God's love for us in Christ led Jesus to pour out his blood for us. Secondly, Mary's act of devotion resembles Christ's in *it's self-sacrificing character*. Mary spent all of her resources on that one act of praise. It reminds us that Jesus spent all of his resources on that one act of self-sacrifice for us on the cross. He emptied himself. He made himself poor that we might become rich; that we might become the children of God. Third, Mary's act of devotion resembles that of Christ in *its appearance of waste and extravagance*. What a waste of love, what a waste of life, to die for men and women who so often reject him and crucify him. Yet his death need not be wasted if we turn to him, if we trust in him, if we follow him and offer to him all that we have.

May this sanctuary be filled with the praise of Christ this morning, even as that home was filled with the fragrance of that perfume Mary poured out on the feet of Jesus. And may one day this whole world be filled with the praise of Christ.

Let us pray:

Take my love; my Lord, I pour
At Thy feet its treasure store.
Take myself, and I will be
Ever, only, all for Thee.