

"A Plain Woman Driven By Love"

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Text: John 12: 1-8

Preached by: Bob Kaiser, Presbyterian Church, Batavia, NY

Jesus said in our reading from John 12 "You always will have the poor with you." As you might suspect, this statement by our Lord would not rank among my favorites and always has been something of a personal embarrassment. Emphasis throughout my ministry has been placed upon encouraging congregations to help those living in poverty. Many sermons have been preached about the foolish spending of money. Indeed one of the apparently most controversial sermons I ever have preached was in another church when I made a casual suggestion about going to one less Friday fish fry and giving the money to the poor. That got quite a response!

If it is so important to work for a fairer economic system, why does Jesus make this disturbing comment about the poor always being with us and why does he praise this woman's extravagant use of expensive perfume? In other words, what is going on in this incident? Matthew, Mark and Luke have variations of this story, which means its message cannot easily be put aside.

Would we agree that this was an act of spontaneous love? The action needs to be seen in the context of Jesus preparing for his own death. He was at Bethany just before Palm Sunday and the last week of his life. Mary sensed what was on the horizon. Her inner feelings of love and concern were overwhelming. She took some perfume that was saved for special days and poured it over Jesus' feet.

There is a Christian song by the Gaither family that has the words:

One day a plain village woman driven by love for her Lord
Recklessly poured out a valuable essence, disregarded the scorn
Once it was broken and spilled out, the fragrance filled all the
room
Like a prisoner set free from his shackles
Like a spirit released from the tomb.

"A plain woman driven by love." That certainly describes Mary. Such intense feelings swelled within that she was driven to act spontaneously. Presbyterians are famous for carefully weighing actions and for doing things "decently and in order." That's okay most of the time but there are occasions when such deliberation can be a definite shortcoming. Where is our ability to feel deeply and to express our feelings? We don't shout "amens"; we don't lift our hands in the air. What do we do when the Spirit touches us?

The goal of every congregation should be to "minister to the head and the heart." The use of reason and planning are important but so is spontaneity. Balance is the key: times for clear thinking and times for immediate, impulsive action and times for both. What is key is a deep commitment, a driving force, to our daily efforts to live as Christ commanded. We might ask ourselves "where is our passion when it comes to living out our faith?"

William Willimon, former chaplain at Duke and now a Methodist bishop, says that in his last parish he preached on the Bible story of the poor man Lazarus and a rich man. He had read an article from Brazil that said that poor people were selling their body organs to the rich in order to put food on the table. A man named Walter had recently sold his eyes to a rich person for a corneal transplant. Walter, who never had a job, was quoted: "At last I can see my family to a better life." Willimon simply read that story to the congregation.

The next morning when he arrived in his office the phone was ringing. Debbie who lived with her husband in a small house near the church said, "I haven't slept all night." "Why?" Willimon asked. "Because of Walter! I can't get him out of my mind. I got David up this morning at 5 o'clock. We talked. We prayed. We were going to get a new car. We can live without a new car. We were going to get a new stereo. We don't need it. We are going to double our giving to the church if you can promise that this money will go to help someone like Walter." An act of spontaneity arising out of deep concern. Willimon guiltily thought to himself "and I slept like a baby last night."

Mary's act was not only spontaneous. It was an act of extravagant love. Judas suggested the perfume was worth 300 denarii, the equivalent of a year's wages in those days! Extravagant love: we are not talking just about monetary gifts. How sad it is when any feelings of love and concern are not expressed generously. Thomas Carlyle, the English writer, loved his wife deeply but never found the words to tell her. After her unexpected death, he was reading some of her letters that conveyed the pain she had experienced because of his thoughtlessness. He cried out, "Oh, if I could see her but once more, even for 5 minutes, to let her know that I loved her through it all. She never did know, never."

Notice that Mary's gift was directed toward someone else. Jesus does not praise those who get enticed by a TV ad and run out and extravagantly buy something. He praised Mary because her act was totally selfless and came at great personal sacrifice. Mary could only think of Jesus' impending death and her need to do something for him.

Without consideration for what others would say, she reached for the perfume. Christians are notorious for spending too much time worrying about what other people are going to say. Teenage Christians think to themselves: "If I don't smoke or have sex in high school what will others think?" Adults are reluctant to bring our faith into a discussion about politics because we worry about the response of others. Mary just poured the perfume and then did something else that was unthinkable. She unbound her long hair and wiped Jesus' feet. In Palestine no respectable woman would ever appear in public with her hair down. That was a sign of an immoral woman. Mary gave no thought to public opinion. She simply responded.

Jesus praised Mary's gift because it came from the heart, was generously given and without thought to what others would think. But what about the poor - that nagging question? Jesus certainly would have remembered a passage from Deuteronomy and many other segments of the Old Testament where it stated that God's people are to be concerned about the poor. Thus Jesus was not suggesting that we ignore the plight of the less fortunate in shaping the church's ministry but he did want to make it clear that there are a multitude of ways to respond when deeply moved in our faith commitment and any form of generous giving on behalf of others is always appropriate. Again, to use one of my favorite expressions, it is a "both/and" matter.

As an example of blending spontaneity and concern for the poor consider this true story. One November in a stewardship sermon in another church I mentioned that a \$100 increase in giving would cover the cost of clothes, transportation and school supplies for a child in Randall Shea's rural school in Guatemala. After the service, someone gave what appeared like a small crumpled piece of paper to Marilyn and said, "Give this to Bob." Marilyn assumed it was a note but it turned out to be a \$100 bill! An act of spontaneous love!

All of us have deep religious feelings. We don't wear our religion on our sleeve or talk about it all the time but Christ has touched us with a hymn, in a hospital room, on retreat, at a baptism or marriage or funeral. Let's keep on wrestling with the issues of life, doing good works on behalf of those in need but let's also find ways, whether it be tears or laughter or prayers, to express those moments when God's love becomes something extraordinary in our lives.