

Texts: John 12

Maybe this is a silly question to ask a bunch of Presbyterians ☺ (known for their frugality) but: have you ever done something you would call extravagant? We have all seen extravagant things on TV: like a royal wedding; or scenes from Hollywood movies. Or we can read about things in the past. But have you ever been part of something yourself? Or done something yourself? Just the other day my sisters and I were recalling the wedding cake that my sister made for my daughter's wedding. She ordered, from NYC, real violet flowers that had been candied. They were flown to Ontario, where they had to be kept in a cool place until she could attach them to the cake. The rest of us didn't even know such things existed. Or last week I got to drive in a relative's BMW. The steering wheel heats up! Have you ever experienced that? How lovely, but I'd have to say, it felt a bit extravagant!

Let's think about what kinds of situations prompt our extravagance: weddings; a graduation, or some accomplishment that was a long time in coming. The birth of a baby. Maybe an accident someone survived, and you are simply overwhelmed with relief and gratitude. Getting a job (what to do with the first pay cheque!?!). When does it seem fitting and right to do something extravagant? When would you "kill the fatted calf?" and go all out?

Depending on our culture, and the circumstances in which we grew up, we will be more *or less* comfortable with occasions of extravagance. I know a woman who lived through WWII in Holland. Frugality and scrimping was bred into her bones. Even now, so many years later, she asks her children not to spend much on her. She has a horror of fancy restaurants: all that expense! It is uncomfortable to her.

For other cultures and personalities, it is extravagant emotion that is uncomfortable. We don't cry too easily in public; we are reserved and restrained. There is a kind of vulnerability in strong emotion. For other cultures, it seems the norm.

Would it be fair to say that the people of the Middle East are more comfortable with strong emotion than an "Anglo" Canadian? The stories of our Bible come from the Middle Eastern culture, a culture different from ours here at MacNab. So if we read the Bible at all, we are constantly being exposed to stories and outpourings that are simply uncomfortable to us. I have always been struck, for instance, by the emotional extravagance of the Psalms, and the permission they give to speak "extravagantly": both anger and joy. Have you ever tried praying some of the words of the Psalms as they might have first been voiced? Like Psalm 63's opening words "Oh God, you are my God; I seek you. My soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you, in a dry and weary land, where there is no water." I think we too often read it like this: (I read it again with no expression). We domesticate the voices of the Bible. Too bad, because such a text is inviting us into a kind of relationship with a God who is extravagantly loving.

What if this God that we worship is an extravagant one? What if God is a God who wants to draw us into extravagant love, and we just don't get it? Or resist it? This summer in our book study I got people to read out loud the text of Psalm 109, an angry one. I think I made people uncomfortable. (Actually, I *know* I made people uncomfortable.) What I was trying to show is that this God we worship can handle strong engagement; God is not afraid, neither of our difficult questions, nor our ranting, our

cries, anything. What if ours is a passionate God? An “all out” God? A profligate God?[I looked up the word “profligate in the dictionary to make sure I had the meaning correct. It has 2 meanings: 1) licentious and dissolute; 2) recklessly extravagant. What if the only way this world came into being was through profligacy?

One of my favourite writers, Annie Dillard, takes the time to pay attention to creation: “If the landscape reveals one certainty, it is that the extravagant gesture is the very stuff of creation. After the first extravagant gesture of creation in the first place, the universe has continued to deal exclusively in extravagances, flinging intricacies and colossi down aeons of emptiness, heaping profusions on profligacies with ever fresh vigour. The whole show has been on fire from the word go.”¹

Reckless extravagance has a negative connotation, but if it is heading in the direction of love, what do you get?

And so we come to the story of the woman who anoints Jesus’ feet. She was extravagant. She took a bottle of nard, worth a whole year’s wages, and pours it on his feet. Reckless extravagance. And, interestingly, even in this Middle Eastern culture, the people around are appalled. In John’s version of the story, it is only Judas who reacts; but in the other gospels it is all the disciples. The reason given is that this outpouring is such a waste: think about all the good that could have been done if the nard had been sold! Think of all the OOTC (Out of the Cold) meals that could have been served with that money! Doesn’t this woman see that? Doesn’t she care about the poor? Doesn’t Jesus? Why does he accept this gift?

Jesus’ words are very direct: “Leave her alone.” Of course Jesus cares for the poor, and wants the hungry to be fed. His life has shown it; he fed the 5,000. And so probably does the woman care for the poor. And if life always followed the rules of good sense; if life was always orderly and logical, then maybe that is what she would do. If this were “ordinary times” then the objection might be fair.

But these are not ordinary times. Jesus is moving towards Jerusalem. He knows, by this point, that it will be a showdown with his enemies. He is preparing to pour himself out; he is preparing to give the most extravagant gift a person can give: his very body and his breath. And this woman has an inkling of Jesus’ extravagance. She has experienced Jesus’ love, towards her and her friends. Maybe it was the forgiveness of her past. Maybe it was a kind of hospitality she had never experienced before. Maybe it was a respect for her as a woman in a culture where women were definitely less seen and less heard than men. She responds effusively, pouring out all she has, and wipes his feet with her hair: a lavish and intimate expression of love.

Whether she knew exactly what was coming in Jerusalem, we don’t know. We don’t hear anything from her. All we know is her action of pouring, and Jesus’ response. And we know that 6 days later, Jesus will wash the feet of his disciples, and WIPE them (same Greek word) with a towel, and tell them that this is to be a sign of love among them, a “new commandment”: “If I your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.” This woman has already fulfilled the new commandment, before Jesus even taught it. She knows intuitively how to respond to Jesus. Extravagance calls forth extravagance. She knows what it looks like to be a disciple.

So where does this story leave us? Can we even come close to placing ourselves in her shoes?

Has there been any experience in our lives that makes us want to fall at Jesus' feet and, forgetting what the crowd might think, forgetting what objections others might raise, forgetting all "good sense", pour out our hearts in gratitude and love? Have we had any experience of the profligacy of God? Have we ever been stopped in our tracks, in awe and wonder, our breath taken away by the love of God? Do we have some story that we carry around, sort of like a diamond, that we can bring out, unwrap, and show people: "Look! What do you make of this? Can it possibly be God's extravagant goodness?"

Maybe you do and maybe you don't. The question is: do you hunger and thirst for such a knowledge? Do you yourself hunger and thirst to know a God who deals in profligacies? Are you attracted to such a God? I believe that is all God asks of us: that we risk the hunger and the thirst. God is thus able to respond; maybe it would be fair to say: God delights to respond. God longs to respond, if we can risk the hunger & the thirst.

May we be given such a grace.

Offered to the congregation of MacNab St Presbyterian by (Rev) Cathy Stewart

