

IN PRAISE OF EXTRAVAGANCE

John 12:1-8

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About 35 or 40 years ago, a family in this church left money in their estate, designated for “sanctuary beautification.” The money had been invested well. We began envisioning a renovation of the space that we now call our chapel, and we presented artist’s renderings of the cinder block replaced by drywall, the stark blonde furniture replaced with a warmer wood, the chancel area with more flexibility, and the addition of faceted glass. We raised enough extra money for it to happen, and it did - all in one summer, the summer of 1998. The worship space was transformed and everyone was thrilled with the results. It was perfect.

But Avon Lake was growing rapidly at that time, and our church was growing, and we soon ran out of room in our beautiful, perfect new space. Regularly, people were sitting outside or in an adjacent room. Groups began meeting and considering options - do we expand that space? It doesn’t really lend itself to expansion. Do we build a satellite church somewhere else? There was no game plan for that. Or do we build a new sanctuary, right after we’ve renovated the old one? We took our time in making that decision, we prayed, we considered. One night we were meeting with our architect, Tom Ziska, and we saw for the first time his dream for our new sanctuary - much more extravagant than any of us had imagined. Someone in the room said, “It’s beautiful, but is it too much? Why does the ceiling need to be so high? Isn’t that a lot of wasted space?” Tom, a man of deep faith

himself, looked at us and said, "This is a place for the worship of God. It should soar. It should cause your spirits to soar."

Where are those places that help us imagine the extravagance of God's love? What words describe the expansiveness of the life God wants for all of us? Is there music that begins to evoke within us what abundant life might be?

Why is it, do you think, that God created over 10,000 species of birds? Different colors, sizes, and songs?

There are 400,000 types of flowering plants - suitable for different climates, some do better in different soil.

Everywhere we look in God's creation we see evidence that God was not interested in a purely utilitarian world.

Walk through the zoo and see that God has a sense of humor.

Whimsy and beauty are everywhere, because life is not meant to be just survived or endured. Life is a gift, meant to be enjoyed.

Does anyone see the Rocky Mountains for the first time and say, "God, it's beautiful, but is it too much? Why do they need to be so big?" No, of course not. We are awestruck. We know that we are in God's presence, and we begin to realize that this is the character of God, the creator - everything God touches is full of possibility and diversity and abundance.

The gospel of John gives us signs to show us the abundance of God's love.

Jesus attends a wedding with his mother, and the host runs out of wine. It's the nightmare scenario of everyone who's ever hosted a party - what if we run out of something? But Jesus to the rescue. He transforms water into wine. 180 GALLONS of new wine are created - far more than even a wedding crowd can consume.

He speaks one afternoon on the side of a hill, and people gather, more and more people. One boy brought two small loaves of bread and five small fish. From that modest offering, Jesus feeds 5,000 people, and has twelve baskets left over.

And after the resurrection, the risen Christ appears on the seashore. The disciples have been out on the fishing boat all night, and they have caught nothing. Exhausted from grief, lost without their beloved leader, they're tired in body and spirit. They see a man on the shore, and they don't recognize him. He says to them, "You didn't catch anything? Go out again, and this time put out your nets on the right side of the boat." Too weary to argue, they do what the man says, and within minutes, the nets are heavy with 153 large fish. They come back to shore and this time they recognize the one whose very life symbolized abundant, extravagant, limitless love.

We are one week away from the start of Holy Week. Jesus knows the time is near. A few days ago, Jesus heard from his dear friends, Mary and Martha. Their brother Lazarus was ill. These two sisters and their brother had become like family to Jesus. Their home was a refuge for him, a sanctuary, a place where he could rest, where he could be himself. They were the friends everyone needs, the kind of friends with whom you do not have to pretend. But they knew his gifts, and now they need him. They need him to come immediately. They may or may not have seen him heal other people, but they'd certainly

heard about those miracles. Now they need one of their own. They're desperate. "Come quickly, Jesus, and heal our brother, Lazarus."

By the time Jesus arrives, Lazarus is already dead. The sisters weep. Jesus weeps. And Jesus revives Lazarus. He stumbles out of the tomb looking like a mummy. He was dead, but now he is alive.

Word spreads about this miracle, far more amazing than any of the others. The Pharisees hear about it, and say to themselves, "This has got to stop." Jesus has become too powerful and too popular and too much of a threat.

It's almost time for the Passover. All of the religious and political leaders are coming together to help control the crowds in Jerusalem. The air is fraught with tension.

It's a good time for Jesus to seek solace at the home of his friends. He brings the disciples with him this time. First, they eat together, and at the table is Lazarus newly alive, and Jesus anticipating that his death was near. The two men are intricately connected - because Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, he has hastened his own death.

No one notices that Mary has left the table until she comes back holding a clay jar in her hands. Wordless, she kneels at Jesus' feet and breaks the jar's neck. The smell of spikenard fills the room. Pure nard was imported from the Himalayas - it was used both as perfume and to anoint the dead. It was almost unbelievably expensive - the amount Mary used was the equivalent of an average yearly salary. But that's only the beginning of what causes shock value in this story.

In this room with her sister and brother and several, if not all of the disciples, Mary loosens her hair - something that is not done by an honorable woman in the presence of

others. Then she pours perfume on Jesus' feet, an intimate act. She wipes off the excess perfume with her hair. The intimacy seems excessive, extravagant.

She's gone overboard, as Judas is quick to note. "Why wasn't this perfume sold for a whole lot of money and given to the poor?" That's what Judas asks, but Jesus brushes him aside.

Jesus' response might have made you bristle, as Beau read it. "You will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me." It sounds callous, but Jesus was quoting from the book of Deuteronomy - the Hebrew scripture says, "There will always be those who are poor, and so I command you - open wide your hand to all the needy and poor." Jesus is not discounting the needs of the poor but is reminding Judas that care for the poor will go on after his physical life is over...which will be soon...

It is so easy for us to criticize the extravagance of others while ignoring our own. "Look at what they spend their money on!"

It is so tempting for us to think of love as a scarce commodity, one we need to hoard. We can be stingy in doling it out, trying to ensure that the recipients are worthy.

I sat on the board of a social service agency one time, a non-profit that worked with those individuals and families who were hovering right at the poverty line. It's a very tricky spot. There is some government money available for people below the poverty line, but sometimes when people work exceptionally hard to try to break out, they find themselves losing all benefits entirely and they fall back further than they were before. So this agency was helping people navigate all of those potential pitfalls. One of the members of the

board was always asking hard questions, very concerned about the bottom line. Sometimes it's good to have someone like that on a team, but I'll never forget one meeting in which this woman said, "Aren't we doing enough for these people?"

Jesus says to Judas, "Leave her alone. There is a time for extravagance."

In just a few days time, there will be another supper, and again, death will cast a shadow over the table.

There will be another foot-washing, this time Jesus will be the one at the basin, and he will wash the feet of the disciples, an act of love that is practically unnecessary - these grown men can wash their own feet.

Love, beauty, music, nature, generosity, forgiveness - none of them are necessary if all we want is to survive.

But if we believe that we were made to thrive, that we are spiritual beings having an earthly experience, then we **need** love that is lavishly given. In this rough and rude world, we need to surround ourselves, intentionally, with reminders that God has something different in mind for humanity. Something better, holier, more beautiful, more transcendent.

It can seem not only extravagant but downright wrong to think about beauty when the world is burning, when children in a bread line are murdered, but if our hearts are not open, if we are not deeply and passionately in love with this world and this life, we are of no use to anyone. It is extravagant beauty which helps us imagine the world as it could be. Every reminder of God's extravagant love motivates us to live with hearts wide open, broken open. Only love will save us.

Let us pray. Holy Jesus, help us to fill your world with the scent of love. In your name. Amen.