

“Love Offers Extravagant Abundance”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger; Fourth Sunday in Lent
Edina Morningside Community Church; March 11, 2018

John 12:1-11

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

As you likely realize, Edina Morningside Community Church is part of a network across the state, the Minnesota Conference of the United Church of Christ. I happen to serve on the Board of Directors for the Conference, which means that every couple months on a Saturday, I meet with other lay and clergy Board members to evaluate ministries, make decisions, and consider possibilities for this statewide movement. Yesterday happened to be a Board meeting day, so I caught a carpool from the Cities to Zion United Church of Christ in Le Seuer. As so often happens, I'm struck by the heart, soul and hard work that the Conference staff brings to their work, and the stories they can tell of our churches. Minnesota Conference Minister Shari Prestemon, who attended our capital campaign celebration last May, also shares her experience of the national United Church of Christ.

Yesterday she described a recent meeting of the 38 Conference Ministers across the country. As you might imagine when a bunch of clergy get in the room, there are a lot of comparisons, one conference to another. Some conferences have a dozen staff members, a small geographic footprint, and massive endowments that fund conference ministry. Others have just one staff member—the Conference minister—who is responsible for resourcing and connecting churches spread across multiple states. These disparities really came to light at the Council of Conference Ministers meeting this week, when it became clear that some conferences are running six-figure deficits, or so thinly stretched that they're using credit cards to pay basic ministry expenses. Shari told us this nearly in tears, because of her heart for these other colleagues. For our part, Minnesota is in the middle of the pack—not nearly as fortunate as some, but far better off than others. Shari acknowledged that we have overly-busy staff already and ran a small deficit last year, but asked us to consider: from what abundance might we share with those who have far less than we do? In particular, we recognize the major asset of the Ashley Endowment, a ten-year-old bequest of millions to the Conference for faith formation. Just the *interest* on this incredible gift generates almost \$400,000 dollars a year, all targeted to faith formation for children and youth. Thanks to this endowment, we have a conference staff minister just for faith formation, can maintain ministries at Pilgrim Point Camp, support resources and trainings for faith formation leaders like Janet Anderson, and send over a dozen youth to the national March for Our Lives in DC later this month. So the Board started to reflect on the possibilities of extravagance in this gift. Even though there's no ought or expectation of sharing, how might we who have so richly received be able to give freely to others with whom we share a covenant in the United Church of Christ?

It's safe to say that this way of thinking is uncommon in our culture: "How can we give away more money, more time, more resources?" What's more common is figuring out how to keep from paying any more than the bare minimum. I know that Javen and I look for every opportunity to get something for

less. When our property taxes started to go up in Saint Paul because there's a new professional soccer stadium being built in our backyard, we called the city and complained that the incremental increase was too much. On the vacation we just returned from, we stayed in a vacation rental instead of a hotel. We bought Groupons rather than pay full price for a meal. We made fancy coffee from our own homebrew and sweet non-dairy creamers, instead of paying the prices at Starbucks two blocks away. I like to think of it as prudent, but I think to others it might look a little cheap.

Far better to consider the example of the woman we hear in scripture today, the story in John 12 of a woman who comes to Jesus when he is gathered with other disciples. She takes this incredibly costly ointment—called “nard”—which would normally be used with just a dab to anoint someone with daily perfume, or you would use a little more if you were anointing a body for burial. This woman pours out a whole pound of it on Jesus, filling the room with the aroma of this abundance. She's anointing him—giving the gift she has to offer from what she possesses. Now you know there's another presence in the room, right? There's the voice of Judas, who's also the voice of everyday society. The common expectation: “Shy was this wasted by her? It could have been sold, could have generated so much income for other good care and ministry!” That's an understandable and prudent response, but for Jesus today, it seems short-sighted, even cheap. She is giving of her abundance, overflowing in gratitude and extravagant love, the sort that is far from common. The sort that we only get every so often in scripture.

Except it's not just in scripture, is it? When I'm reflecting on this story, I'm also thinking about our experience in the church, because this is a place too of extravagant generosity. This is not just a biblical story, but one you live out every single day! I'm humbled each time I consider all the gifts to the Capital Campaign, all the ways I know you've stretched (and continue to stretch) to make generous gifts there. What's just as humbling to me is the person who has very little to give in the way of money, but whose weekly offering represents a large portion of take-home pay each week. Others of you show up consistently with your time—here for church on Sunday, Spiritual CrossFit classes on Monday, Bible study on Tuesday, choirs on Wednesday, meetings on Thursdays, and Sunday school prep on Saturday! We pour out our offerings like the woman with costly perfume and nard. Asking ourselves “from what abundance might we consider sharing with others”?

I love you dearly, and sometimes wonder if the church asks too much. But I know that church can be so much more than a casual thing we do on the side. It holds the promise of being the main focusing lens and perspective through which we encounter, understand, and serve the world. So I expect that there will continue to be invitations to participate in all sorts of ways through the church's life: One Great Hour of Sharing, Beacon's meetings with legislators, similar ways to “go with our dough” and donations, plus many other invitations to financial and time commitment in the church. As I hope baby Bennett (baptized today) will grow up to discover in Christian faith, the more we put into this common life the stronger it gets and the more joyful our participation might become. This is a high commitment, high reward calling that is on our lives, and if we give in to the penny-pinching stinginess that Judas represents, we'll miss out on the chance to participate in the radical abundance of this faith.

Because it all comes from grace. None of us come into the world on our own power—it is God who knits us together in our mothers' wombs. From the moment we are born, others feed, clothe, bathe and care for us. All that we have may come through our wise choices and hard work, but the talents and wisdom have first come from beyond us. God has poured on our heads, hearts and souls all the abundance with which we move through these days. So the church exists in turn as a pouring out of mercy and extravagant abundance to others.

When we go from the sanctuary today, imagine being poured out. Perhaps the church is the pitcher of life-giving baptismal water, or the vessel of fragrant oil, which God will use to bless a challenging, cynical or broken world. Think of us, leaving this building, as the water of grace and the oil of joy, poured out into the world which God so loves. From what abundance might we continue to share with others? Amen.