

Extravagant Faith in Jesus
A Sermon on John 12:1-8
Fifth Sunday in Lent
April 7, 2019

Introduction

We begin the season of Lent by exploring different aspects of repentance. We prepare our hearts and minds to look beyond ourselves and turn toward God. Today we shift the focus to Holy Week, the time of Jesus' passion, when Jesus' commitment to God is tested, just as in the Temptation.

This text at the beginning of the Passion Story includes Mary and Judas. Lurking in the background are the religious leaders, who are plotting to kill Jesus. We see three different reactions to Jesus. Mary is a faithful disciple who gives all that she has to Jesus. Judas is an unfaithful disciple who steals from the common purse and who will betray Jesus for personal gain. The religious leaders respond in fear and plot to kill Jesus.

The text confronts us with a decision. How will we respond to Jesus?

First Move: Three Different Reactions to Jesus

John turns our attention to the cross. He tells us that it is six days before Passover. This story comes immediately before John's story of the processional on Palm Sunday.

Jesus is in Bethany, just outside Jerusalem. He is at the home of the sisters Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus.

Jesus has just raised Lazarus from the dead. In the Gospel of John, that is what provokes the religious leaders to plot to arrest him. In the Synoptic Gospels, the disturbance at the Temple provokes the plot to arrest Jesus. In the Gospel of John, the scene in the Temple takes place in Chapter 2, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

Some Judeans have witnessed the raising of Lazarus. They report the miracle to the Pharisees. Instead of being filled with joy that the power of God is working through Jesus, the Pharisees are fearful. They form a council with the chief priests to decide what to do about Jesus. "If we allow him [to continue] in this way, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and will remove both the place and the nation of ours."

This is one place in the gospels where the threat of Rome is explicit. The religious leaders of the Judeans are afraid that the Romans will destroy the people and exile them if they allow Jesus to continue doing miracles. They fear the power of the Romans more than they trust God. They believe that Jesus offers false hope—he is too weak to confront the Romans.

The chief priests and the Pharisees resolved from that day to kill Jesus. They would sacrifice Jesus to the Romans to protect the whole people from being slaughtered. It sounds like political leaders today, who believe that they know what is best for the people. They force their own beliefs on the people.

Jesus is at dinner at the home of his friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Martha is deaconing, serving the guests. To deacon in Greek means to be a table servant. Lazarus is reclining beside Jesus. Men reclined for festive dinners in those days instead of sitting at a table.

While Jesus is reclining, Mary takes a pound of perfume and pours it on Jesus' feet. Imagine the smell. A drop or two of perfume lasts all day. Mary pours out a Roman pound, 12 ounces. Of course the smell filled the whole house. Gail O'Day, a UCC scholar, calls it perfume overkill. It counteracts the smell of death that filled the tomb when Jesus raised Lazarus.

The perfume is nard. It is imported from the foothills of the Himalayas in India. It is extravagantly expensive. It costs 300 denarii. A denarii was a days' wage. Three hundred denarii would be almost a year's wages. In today's prices, even at minimum wage, that would be around \$20,000 for a bottle of perfume.

Mary is anointing the feet of Jesus with the perfume. We have been talking in recent weeks about the different ways in which Jesus is anointed. It is a different Greek word here: ἀλείφω instead of χρίω. χρίω carries symbolic meaning. It is the root of the word for Christ. ἀλείφω has a purely outward meaning, to comfort the sick. The disciples anointed the sick. It is common in a healing prayer service to rub oil on the person's head to comfort them.

Mary is anointing Jesus' feet with perfume instead of anointing his head with oil. Mary is anointing Jesus for burial. The bodies of the dead were washed and anointed with oil before a sheet was placed over the body and it was laid in a tomb.

Mary knows what to do without being told. She prepares him for his death before he explains the true meaning of his death.

Mary also wipes Jesus' feet with her hair. The Greek verb for "wipe" is the same verb that is used to describe Jesus' wiping of the disciples' feet in the foot washing that takes place at the Last Supper in John 13. Jesus will wash the disciples' feet out of love for them and he will ask them to love one another as he has loved

them. What Jesus will do for the disciples and what he will ask them to do for each other, Mary has already done for him. She fulfills the love commandment before Jesus teaches it.

Judas questions the extravagant expense. “We could sell the perfume and give the money to the poor.”

Have you ever given someone a gift that cost a year’s wages? What would your husband or wife say if you gave someone a gift that expensive?

Jesus says, “Leave her alone. She is preparing me for burial.” Jews didn’t embalm the dead. Instead they covered them with oils and perfumes, which kept the smell down for three days until they were sealed in the tomb.

The narrator tells us Judas’ true motivation: he is a thief. This is the same word that is used to describe the person who climbs over the fence and threatens the flock in John 10. He is contrasted with the shepherd, who comes in through the gate. The phrase, “not because the poor were a concern to him,” echoes the language that “the sheep were not a concern to the hired hand.” The narrator is suggesting that when Judas betrays Jesus, he betrays the flock, too. He cares for himself instead of caring for the flock.

Second Move: What Is Faith?

Faith in Jesus is the defining quest in the Gospel of John. The characters in John are faced with a central question: Do you believe that Jesus is sent by God to bring us life? Eternal life, life in all its fullness.

The limited time of Jesus’ presence creates urgency to respond in faith. Mary responds with extravagant faith. The political leaders respond in fear. Judas responds by acting in his self interest.

The opposite of faith is fear. The chief priests and the Pharisees fear that Jesus will be impotent against the Romans. They feel threatened by Jesus because he gives people hope but they think it is false hope. They fear the military power of the Romans than they trust in the live-giving power of God.

Self interest leads many Christians in our society to be practical atheists. They act as if God doesn’t exist. They don’t recognize that God has made any claims on their lives. It is all about me. It is their own wishes that matter. What programs does this church have for me or my children? They are looking for a church that has a practical benefit. They show little interest in stretching themselves or deepening their faith.

They come by it honestly. Our culture teaches us to be self-reliant. The ideal is the self-made man. We don’t need help. We can do it ourselves.

Our culture teaches us to be practical. Focus on getting things done instead of believing in principles. Concrete action is what matters, not the interior life.

Our culture teaches us to be individualistic. Have it your way. Freedom means being free to do your own thing.

Much of modern religion focuses on what is useful and practical. There is extravagance in the gospels whenever Jesus is present. In the wedding at Cana, Jesus turns six stone jars of water into 180 gallons of wine. Jesus turns a few loaves and fishes into a meal for 5,000. Jesus tells Peter where to cast his nets and he cannot haul the nets in because they are filled with so many fish.

This extravagance reflects the power of God at work in our lives. Faith is our response to God. Do we trust that there is a goodness at the heart of reality that fills our lives with meaning? If so, we will respond in faith extravagantly, just as God has acted extravagantly with us.

Raymond Brown, a leading scholar on the Gospel of John, points out that John nearly always uses faith as a verb not a noun. It is not an internal belief but an active commitment. John uses the unusual expression, believing into Jesus. It is a physical act. It requires us to move. It is more than trust or confidence in Jesus. It is acceptance of what Jesus claims to be and commitment of one's life to him. The commitment carries with it a willingness to respond to God's commands as they are presented by Jesus.

The theologian John Dillenberger writes that faith is our attitude toward God: do we depend on ourselves or do we look outside ourselves? Do we recognize that the source of life comes from outside ourselves?

Faith is about making room for mystery. We don't pretend to know it all. We recognize our limits. Faith is not about rejecting the self; it is about redirecting the self. It is about rejecting the false self that society imposes on us and embracing the true self that is oriented to God.

By orienting ourselves to God, we give up our need for control. We open ourselves up to God's call. We are willing to try something new instead of playing it safe.

Having faith in God means having faith in other people. We open ourselves up to other people. We don't have to impose our will on a group; we are willing to speak openly, but if the group is headed a different direction, we are willing to go with the consensus.

This is hard for me. I am a perfectionist by nature. Perfectionists like to control things they care about, like worship. Yet if we let go and trust other talented people,

we may go deeper and farther than if we had controlled all the details. Instead of fearing that they will screw up, we will find our load is lifted because others can help.

Third Move: What Is Extravagant Faith Today?

Mary has extravagant faith. She has no husband, yet she gives up financial security. She knows she cannot control the future. She is not afraid to spend lavishly on Jesus. She gives freely to Jesus because he has awakened her to the abundant life that God offers each of us. She trusts that a deeper connection with God is the best security she can have.

What does extravagant faith look like today? Not many of us feel called to take a vow of poverty and live in a monastery or an abbey.

Part of my discernment process in my call to seminary came during my Walk to Emmaus in 2001. It is an intense three-day weekend of spiritual development. We had small-group discussions after 15 talks and I kept asking the same question after each talk, “We spend so much of our time at our jobs. If you take this stuff seriously, how do you make it part of your job?”

I later realized that I already had an example from personal experience. One of the lawyers at my law firm in the 1980s was Max Lawrence. Everyone liked Max. He was friendly and gregarious. He laughed a lot and he made others laugh. He told me that when he got into law in the 1950s, people didn’t see it as a way of getting rich. They saw it as a profession. It was about serving your client. Max always treated law as a profession. He never was very good at billing. Unless you keep track of how many minutes you work for each client each day, you can’t send them a bill. Most lawyers write their time slips each day. Max would do it every two or three months, and of course he would forget a lot of the time he had worked on cases. It just wasn’t important to Max.

Max always treated opposing lawyers and clients with respect. People lit up a smile when they saw him. He got a lot of clients who got to know him when he was the lawyer on the other side. They said, “That’s the kind of lawyer I want to have.”

I have always tried to be a lawyer like Max. I try to build relationships with attorneys and clients on the other side. That is what makes settlements possible. You are honest and direct with each other and tell them what your client really needs out of this case. You ask what their client really needs. It is not always about money. If both parties can get their needs met, it is much easier to settle a case.

Whatever job you have, you can put other people over the money you will make. That is being other-centered.

You can also look at your job as giving you the financial freedom to commit yourself more fully to God in your free time.

Bernie McNickle made a good living running a dental supply business in Tulsa. He and his wife Joyce were active in Harvard Avenue Christian Church in Tulsa for 20 years. They retired in the 1990s and moved to Oklahoma City. When they retired they made church work their full-time job.

Bernie was somewhat conservative politically, but he and Joyce joined a RAIN Team in the 1990s. RAIN stands for Regional Aids Interfaith Network. Members of a RAIN Team were assigned one client who had HIV/AIDS and ran errands for them. They took them to the doctor or the pharmacy or the grocery store. HIV/AIDS was a death sentence then and Bernie saw how it debilitated people. He was inspired by how people with AIDS coped with the disease. He admired their strength and courage.

Bernie and Joyce sort of adopted me and my daughter, Mary Kate, who was in second grade when we joined First Christian Church of Edmond. I was a single parent raising a young child and I felt a little out of place at First Christian. A lot of their activities and Sunday school classes were geared for married couples with children. Bernie was my sponsor on the Walk to Emmaus. Bernie and I were in a small-group for seven years that met for 90 minutes every Monday morning at 7 a.m. Bernie and Joyce invited Mary Kate and me to their home for dinner several times. They were like grandparents to Mary Kate.

Bernie was the moderator of First Christian and an officer of the Regional Church for several years. He always tried to bring people together who were having conflict. One of the last events I attended at First Christian was in summer 2007, just after I accepted the call to be your minister. The General Assembly had passed a resolution that said the Iraq War was an unjust war. There were a lot of conservatives at First Christian and they were upset about the resolution. Sharon Watkins, our General Minister and President, flew in from Indianapolis to lead an all-church meeting to hear their objections.

Bernie put the meeting together. He was the last speaker. He urged people to put their political differences aside and be church together. He said, "Don Heath and I don't agree on a lot politically. But I consider him one of my best friends."

That is one of the nicest compliments I have received. I asked him to be my best man when Mary and I were married about a year and a half later.

Conclusion

Faith in God is not just an intellectual proposition. It means having faith in other people. It means that you make caring for people and helping them your life's work, whether you are clergy or lay. Mary had extravagant faith. So did Max Lawrence and Bernie McNickle.

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