

Extravagant Love: from Jesus and for Jesus

A Sermon preached by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey

Church of St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA, March 13, 2016

The Fifth Sunday in Lent (year C), Philippians 3:4b-14, John 12:1-8

*Philippians 3:4b-14 (NRSV): If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.*

*Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*

*Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*

*John 12:1-8 (NRSV): 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."*

I wonder what kind of challenge the first great explorers faced when they returned home with stories of the New World. They went off to search for India, and instead they found some land that most Europeans had never heard of. Why go there? What was so special about this new world to risk leaving home, to spend all that money, to give so much of your life to experience some strange new country?

I imagine that the explorers had a hard time convincing people at first. How do you describe some place that is so new, and so different, yet so worthwhile that nothing compares to it? I suppose that the only way to communicate this experience is to ask people to join you there—to experience for themselves the surpassing value that they have yet to discover.

In today's readings, Paul and Mary are a little like those explorers. Paul writes to the Christians in Philippi to encourage them to keep the faith despite trials and difficulties that they encounter. Here is Paul, chained in prison for preaching about Jesus, writing to tell them "Rejoice in the Lord always!" Here is Paul, telling them that all the status he once had—even his status as a pious and religious man—all that he had gained, he counts as loss. Why? How? What did Paul discover?

Like the new world to the Europeans, what Paul discovered is not so easily described. Paul writes "I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." Because Christ has made Paul his own—because of Jesus' love for Paul, nothing else

compares. Nothing. What Paul discovered changed his life beyond his imagination—beyond concrete description. So he resorts more to poetry and superlatives. What Paul found was the love of God in Jesus Christ. He found God’s love in Jesus to be the source of true joy and true life.

Mary, in today’s Gospel reading, seems to have discovered this joy too. Mary and Martha are again hosts to Jesus and his disciples. This is Mary who sat with Jesus’ disciples and learned from him, receiving a welcome unusual for women in that day. This is Mary who wept at the grave of her brother Lazarus, and cried out to Jesus for help. Lazarus, raised by Jesus from the dead, was there at that meal with them. On this occasion, Mary brought out an expensive ointment similar to Myrrh, and anointed Jesus with it. Nard was used for the head, but Mary used it for Jesus’ feet, and the smell of the perfume filled the house. She wiped his feet with her hair—an act of vulnerability and intimacy. This experience left a lasting impression on those who witnessed it. What stirred in Mary’s heart to show such lavish love for Jesus?

Judas shows how lavish an act this was—he protests at the cost of such an act of devotion. The cost was something like a full year’s wages. Why not give the money to the poor, Judas asks? Jesus does not deny the value of caring for the poor. He is not discounting the importance of generosity to those in need. But Jesus also knows that our love for the poor comes from our love for him—and that his love for us is what drives true generosity to the poor. Before we love our neighbors as ourselves, we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart and all our mind and all our strength. Mary shows this whole-hearted love to Jesus in this encounter. Perhaps her love for Jesus is so hard to put into words that she resorts to this lavish demonstration of her devotion and affection. What did Mary find in Jesus that drew such love from her? What she found was the love of God in Jesus Christ. She found God’s love in Jesus to be the source of true joy and true life.

Others have responded to God with generous and self-giving love. Others have pointed to an experience of God far more valuable than their greatest accomplishments and beyond simple description.

A great Harvard professor discovered something when he set aside his credentials and prestige of Academia, and went to live with people with developmental disabilities. Here, he discovered no great minds, no great new theories. He discovered the love of God in the lives of people who often made no sense, who brought only simple love and human sharing. Only then did Professor Henri Nouwen write contemplative reflections that try to capture the love of God in metaphor and poetry and stories of simple love. What did Henri Nouwen find?

Another man of great intellect was known as a great theologian—Thomas Aquinas, who wrote vast Systematic Theologies, including the great work “Summa Theologica.” Thomas is still considered one of the greatest theologians of the church. But later in life, he had a profound experience of God, perhaps you might say an experience of the Holy Spirit. He discovered a powerful relationship with God that changed him deeply.

After that experience, he called his great intellectual writings and theological achievements “straw!” And remember that straw is what you use to line the bottom of a horse’s stall. What did Thomas Aquinas discover that made his great works “straw” by comparison?

Can we discover what these men and women discovered? Can we find what they found? I believe that we can. These people gave such lavish love for Jesus because they discovered Jesus' lavish love for them. Paul found mercy from the one whose followers he was persecuting and arresting. Paul found the grace of God in Jesus that surpassed all the righteousness of the Pharisees. Mary found Jesus' love for her that drew her in, that responded to her inquiry, that gave her a heartfelt and compassionate love as she grieved Lazarus. And Mary saw Jesus raise her brother from the dead. She knew his power to give us all new life. Henri Nouwen and Thomas Aquinas and others found that in all their endeavors, the greatest joy possible is not simply knowing about God, but knowing God himself, and personally feeling his love and compassion.

What did these people discover that made them love Jesus with such sacrifice and abandon and joy? They opened themselves up to Jesus' lavish love for them!

In his life, death and resurrection, Jesus has overcome the powers of this world and the powers of our own fears and sorrows. Like Judas, we often let the world overtake our love of God. We say we are free, but we choose to fear, and we choose to follow false gods and place our trust in transient things. We choose to focus on our sadness and frustration rather than our blessings and what great things God is doing right in front of our noses. Jesus sets us free from that fear, free from the power of sin and death, free to know God and free to know and feel God's love for us. Jesus invites us into an eternal life that sees our sorrows as transient and our blessings as glimpses of God's eternal and permanent goodness.

Trying to describe the experience of God's lavish love is beyond our words—beyond description. Like explorers describing the new world, the best description is an invitation to come and see for yourselves. Come into the room filled with the smell of perfume in Mary's hands. Come hear Paul describe feeling joyful while he is in prison. Come hear great theologians and professors share that the love of God surpasses great intellect. Come discover that God loves you just as lavishly as he loves them.

The journey of Lent is a journey toward Easter—a journey that calls us deeper with God so that our joy in Christ will be greater. Seek Jesus as Mary did, surrender to Jesus as Paul did. Look more for God's blessings and less for the troubles of this world. Look beyond merely knowing about God, and seek his extravagant and lavish love for you! You will discover what they discovered, and you will know the joy and freedom that they found in Christ. If you view your life through the priorities of this world, you will find despair. View your life through God's eyes, and you will find joy that surpasses description and peace that passes understanding.

My brothers and sisters, not that we have already obtained this goal, but let us press on to make it our own. Let us press on in our prayers and in our priorities. Let us press on to open more of ourselves to faith and trust in God, to deeper and deeper relationship with God in Christ. In this life, all of our challenges and priorities will take their place. And we will discover more deeply each day the life of true joy and true life.