

**“Honoring the Body”**  
**John 12:1-8**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent**  
**April 7, 2019**

I grew up in a household that saved everything and wasted nothing. We washed our Ziploc bags. Grocery bags were always re-used. Clothes are worn way past their style expiration dates. My siblings and I still poke fun at my mother who keeps us shivering in the winter and a little too warm in the summer. Until recently, no one dared adjust the thermostat. If we were too cold we knew to “put on a sweater.” Lined up in the fridge are Tupperware containers containing specimens of food so small that you wonder if they are meant to be eaten or studied under a microscope. My mother earned this way of life honestly. Her mother, my grandmother, grew up poor on a farm during the Great Depression. Sometimes there was not enough food to feed nine children. There were no margins. Nothing went to waste.

As a consequence I grew up with the quasi-Christian belief that frugality is saintly. Frugality is what enables generosity. Spending less on myself enables me to share more with others. It also lifts the burden on the earth. By limiting the use of resources we take less and preserve more. This can all be absolutely true. Frugality can and does enable generosity. But it can almost make us hard-hearted, stingy, judgmental. It can make us like Judas in the text today.

What I love about Judas today is that his stinginess is wrapped up in a social justice question. It’s a question I could imagine asking myself, “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” It’s not a bad question, though the writer of John’s Gospel disagrees. “Judas said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief.” Maybe that’s true. But I think making Judas out to be the scapegoat devoid of true compassion takes the sting away from us. The truth is that any rigid ethic – including a social justice one – can limit our ability to experience the kind of extravagant generosity offered by Mary, commended by Jesus, today.

Mary pours out an excessive amount of perfume for a friend. You just didn’t do that. It was hugely expensive – nearly a year’s worth of a laborer’s wages, and most of it probably hit the floor. It was a waste and everybody knew it. But it’s even more reckless than that. Barbara Brown Taylor describes it this way, “. . . as everyone in the room watches her, Mary does four remarkable things in a row. First she loosens her hair in a room full of men, which an honorable woman never does. Then she pours perfume on Jesus’ feet, which is also not done. The head, maybe--people do that to kings--but not the feet. Then she touches him--a single woman rubbing a single man’s feet--also not done, not even among friends. Then she wipes the perfume off with her hair--totally inexplicable--the bizarre end to an all around bizarre act.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Prophet Mary,” [http://day1.org/1760-the\\_prophet\\_mary](http://day1.org/1760-the_prophet_mary)

It's this physical nature of Mary's act that the worship team wanted us to focus on today. The perfume on Jesus feet. The way in which Mary honors Jesus' body. And our question today focuses on that. How are you honoring your own body? These are important questions that certainly grow from the text.

But I couldn't help but see how Jesus receives this gift. How he credentials his own need – his own need for touch, his own need for connection, his own need for extravagant generosity. It's almost as though God wants us to see that God is not above the need to be tended to, cared for, loved. And if God is not above that essential need, who are we to pretend that love is a waste of our time, a waste of our life?

I raise the question because in a church like ours where faith is so often directed toward questions of social justice – a not so subtle equation can get setup – one that pits the needs of others against your own needs. It is a false equation when we undermine the essential extravagance, the essential wastefulness that is love itself. Love is not a zero sum game. It does not come in limited quantities. The more it is spent, the more it grows.

Paul Tillich said this about Mary's waste:

She has performed an act of holy waste growing out of the abundance of her heart. Judas has his emotional life under control. Jesus alone knows that without the abundance of heart nothing great can happen. He knows that calculating love is not love at all. The history of humankind is the history of men and women who wasted themselves and were not afraid to do so. They did not fear to waste themselves in the service of a new creation. They wasted out of the fullness of their hearts.

Do not suppress in yourselves the abundant heart, the waste of self-surrender. Do not suppress the impulse to do what Mary did at Bethany. You will be reproached as she was. But Jesus was on her side and he is also on yours.<sup>2</sup>

Mary loves out of the fullness of her heart in a way that is concrete - in perfume that she purchases, the touch of her hands to Jesus' feet, the wiping of his feet with her hair. And this touch is what keeps love from being nothing more than sentimentality, or a disembodied idea. It's compassion in action, extended to the flesh, to the body of Jesus.

Peter Bruun helped us make that love concrete on Wednesday night as he led a workshop that asked us to write love letters. To put on paper all kinds of love. And with courage he shared with us some extraordinary love letters he had written. To his daughter who died of a substance abuse disorder – a letter expressing his wish that his love would be enough to save her but confessing his knowledge that it

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Tillich, *The New Being*, pp. 46-49.

could not on its own. To his wife as their marriage began to unravel expressing the truth that the love they had shared is not something that could ever be undone.

What was extraordinary and not surprising at the same time, was the way in which his own vulnerability opened up a space for those of us in the room to share our own love letters and our own struggles with how difficult it is to be compassionate and forgiving of ourselves for the imperfect ways that we have loved and will love. When we received Peter's wasteful expression of love – love that he did not have to share with any of us – it cracked many of us open to share more deeply with each other.

This is exactly what happens here in John. This woman “wipes” Jesus' feet with her hair. She “wipes” his feet – a word that is used only one other place, later in the John's Gospel at the last supper, when Jesus wipes the feet of his disciples after washing them. There, after feasting from the same table that we are feasting from today, he tells his disciples that the greatest commandment of all is to love, and then he makes that love concrete washing and wiping the feet of his disciples just as Mary had done for him. It is almost as if the extravagant act of generosity given to Jesus by Mary flows outward from his life into the lives of the disciples whom he then teaches, and commands to love one another just the same. His final act becomes impossibly intertwined with the wasteful act of Mary. Love – human and divine - all mixed up together.

I had thought I was writing a sermon this week about taking care of your body. A kind of call to action to get to the gym, or to treat your body as the kind of gift that it is to the world. And these are good things. But underneath that I think is a more foundational question for all of us – are you willing and able to love and be loved in concrete, tangible, wasteful ways? If God needs to be loved like that, can you accept your need as just as essential? And can you share with others the same? Because when we see ourselves as worthy of wasteful, extravagant love, then all the practices that are good for us to participate in to care for ourselves – they often follow. And when we see ourselves as worthy of God's wasteful, extravagant love then that love flows easily outward to others in the world. An abundant heart.

My friend, the Rev. Meg Peery McGlaughlin, says that the church, at its core, practices this kind of waste. It's a waste of time coming here each Sunday when you could be planting a garden, doing some work, enjoying your coffee. It's a waste for the choir to spend hours each week practicing anthems that disappear in 3-5 minutes. It's a waste putting so much time into a sermon that is heard and gone in 15 minutes. It's a waste turning on the heat or the air and gathering together to tell the story of love in action. But Meg has come to see it as a holy kind of waste.

“To be the church,” she said, “requires a Mary-kind of love. A willingness to waste ourselves for the one that we love. Because, like Mary, our love is for God...and God's love is for us.”<sup>3</sup>

I try to remember that when we come to the table and waste a good 15 minutes on a kind of pretend meal with a little bit of bread and juice. We are rehearsing extravagant love. And what the world needs – actually what our city

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<sup>3</sup> The Rev. Meg Peery McLaughlin, paper presented to *The Well* preaching group. I am grateful to Meg whose paper helped shape the core of this sermon.

needs right now – is not more cynicism, more run-down bodies dragging themselves to the daily grind. More naysayers who look at the world and see nothing but incompetence and failure. What we need right now is people with abundant hearts. People who have opened themselves completely to God’s extravagant, wasteful love, and let it flow over the whole of their lives – bodies, minds, spirits.