

A Display of Extravagance

John 12:1-8

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

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I remember the day well even though it is now more than a decade, perhaps closer to two decades, past. I was sitting in my office at the church I served at the time. It was, for all intents and purposes, a regular day.

I don't know exactly what I was doing, perhaps writing a sermon or a newsletter article; perhaps preparing for Bible study or Sunday school lesson, but I walked Betsy. Betsy was a member of the congregation and is one of the kindest people you could ever meet. She also has a way of paying attention to people's needs and giving the gift of care in the face of them.

I looked up when I heard her voice. There was a short staircase that came down into my office and as I saw her descend I noticed a bowl of water and a towel in her arms. She came to the bottom of the staircase, set down her load, looked at me and said, "I have come to wash your feet."

I don't remember exactly how I responded, although I am certain that my response included an awkward pause as my mind raced with wonderings looking down to see what shoes I had worn and discover if they were among the more odiferous, looking back at Betsy and wondering if this meant I should wash her feet, too. I suspect I stammered out words of gratitude as I worked to mask my initial surprise and discomfort.

But what I knew was that it was important for me to receive this gift.

And so, I got up from my desk. I crossed the room to where Betsy had prepared a place. I took off my shoes and I let her take each foot in her hands and wipe them with warm clear water. I allowed myself to relax into this moment. I knew I had received a gift of extravagant love.

Similarly, Parker Palmer, in his book *Let Your Life Speak*, writes of a gift of care from a friend. For him, this came in a time when he was experiencing depression. After writing about the pep talks and other unhelpful responses, he says this, "Blessedly, there were several people, family and friends, who had the courage to stand with me in a simple and healing way. One of them was a friend named Bill who, having asked my permission to do so, stopped by my home every afternoon, sat me down in a chair, knelt in front of me, removed my shoes and socks, and for half an hour simply massaged my feet. He found the one place in my body where I could still experience feeling - and feel somewhat reconnected with the human race.

Palmer goes on writing, “Bill rarely spoke a word. When he did, he never gave advice but simply mirrored my condition. He would say, ‘I can sense your struggle today,’ or ‘It feels like you are getting stronger.’ I could not always respond, but his words were deeply helpful: they reassured me that I could still be seen by *someone...*” (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 2000, pg 63-64).

Friends, acts of care matter. And Jesus knew that feeling long before Parker Palmer or I ever experienced it.

Here was Jesus. He had come to Bethany. It was a place where he had surely spent much time, after all this was the home of his dear friends Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. They had invited him to dinner, likely at a table he had sat around many times before. And it wasn’t only him with them that day, but others were present. And the shared meal seemed to be about togetherness and about gratitude. After all, it had not been long since Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. And this was a family that wanted to say thank you.

But Jesus had been out of the area for a bit. Remember, life sometimes feels threatening to those who deal in death, so after calling Lazarus forth from the tomb, Jesus had taken some time away, he had left the public eye for a bit, as the powers that be began to weave a plan for his demise.

But he was not one to shy away from conflict. And he was certainly not one to let the threats of those who lived in fear become more important than the relationships of love he was building.

So, Jesus arrived in Bethany. And he was welcomed into the home of friends. And it was there that the gospel writer John tells us, “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” (John 12:3, NRSV).

What a gift she gave to him.

Those feet had carried him miles and miles over roads and countryside.

They had allowed him to stand for hours as he taught and healed and tended to people who were following him.

They inevitably knew what it was to run gleefully over a hillside of blooming wildflowers, to step with purpose toward a goal, and to plod with exhaustion when his energy was at a low. His feet also knew what it was to make a choice to move away from or toward the threats that were aimed his way.

And let us not pretend that Jesus’ friends weren’t aware of all of this.

So, with a mix of love that had built over years of friendship, gratitude for the ways he had brought life back to their home, care as she worked to offer some tenderness, and grief as she anticipated that at any moment he could be gone - in the mix of all these realities, Mary could do nothing other than take his tired feet in her hands and care for them in a gift of extravagant love.

So, how funny it is then that the first response we hear is from Judas? And in many ways, it is too bad he is the one we are told voices these concerns. It is too bad that the gospel writer (or a later editor) includes parenthetical statements that set us up to dislike Judas.

Because the reality is that many of us have these same responses to extravagance. How can you be so wasteful? Why are you being so expressive? Be controlled, be quiet, be orderly, practice restraint. Something in us knows where Judas comes from. Something in us wants everything to be proper and in order. Something in us wants this even though we know we follow a God who is far more extravagant.

So, we hear Judas mask this instinct as if it is a concern for the poor. And we happily get on board that train. But Jesus doesn't take the bait. After all, as he says, the poor will always be present.

But let us not be confused by this statement. If we've been paying attention to Jesus, we know this isn't a dismissal of the very real conditions of poverty, after all this is much of what his life's mission and work have been about. Rather, when Jesus spoke those words, the others at the table, Jews like him, would likely have heard the reminder in Deuteronomy that says, "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open you hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land'" (Deuteronomy 15:11, NRSV).

Any self-respecting Jewish person would not have heard Jesus' words as a dismissal of the poor, but rather as a both/and statement. Yes, the poor will always be present and you are called to share with them *AND* yes, sometimes we simply need to worship extravagantly and care extravagantly for those in our midst.

What would happen if we opened ourselves to acts of extravagance...in our worship? In our care of one another? In our care of creation? In our care of ourselves?

How would God be honored if we decided to set aside our restraint and to enter into the fullness of life and love that God offers us?

How would our relationships with others change if we could move beyond perceptions and expectations to simply be real and honest? How would our relationships change if we loved with abundance and abandon rather than with restraint and control?

What if we were paying so much attention to one another that we noticed what the other needed?

What if we were willing to risk ourselves to care for another? Again, look at Mary. Not only did she risk the response of others, others who like Judas would criticize her for her wastefulness, but she likely also risked her reputation as she lowered herself to the role of a servant and as she gave herself so fully in this act. Did you notice that John even tells us that she wiped his feet with her hair?

Friends, we claim again and again that God's love is abundant, extravagant, even excessive. But too often we are miserly in ours. What if this story, this season, and our faith offer us an invitation to live and love more fully, more extravagantly, more abundantly? May it be so.