

March 21, 2010

## **Prodigal Devotion**

Read: John 12: 1-8

Last week we looked at Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. The dictionary defines 'prodigal' as "extravagantly wasteful." As Cyndi and I looked at this week's story of Mary pouring the perfume on Jesus' feet, I was struck by the extravagance of this act of love. We came up with the title "Prodigal Devotion."

Why 'prodigal?' Because Mary's acts of devotion were extravagant, reckless and rash. Judas immediately recognized this and objected. He mentally calculated that the cost of the perfume splashing down over Jesus' feet –and quickly pointed out that the money could have been better spent on helping the poor.

Extravagance is not hard to find in our culture. I still have not gotten over the shock of looking at a scarf in a Prada store in Heathrow airport. The price was close to five hundred dollars—for one scarf!!! I couldn't find a price on the purses or shoes or other things – which is a little bit scary in itself. I guess if you are concerned about prices, you shouldn't be in the store!

I could list a whole bunch of things, like certain resorts, clothes, cars, sunglasses, houses, salaries, restaurants, and spas which I might use as examples of extravagance. But I won't. I won't because when it comes to extravagant or reckless spending of money, it is almost always the other person who is extravagant. Our comments might go like this: "I can't believe what they spent on that house ... or car... or vacation..." But few of us would label what we spend on ourselves as extravagant. What we spend on ourselves, we justify.

We say to ourselves [as we have been so ably taught by commercials], "We deserve it" or "I have worked hard for this – it is my right to do this for myself" or "others are doing it" or [one I have used a couple of times ] "I don't do this very often." What we label as extravagant or prodigal has a great deal to do with whether we are talking about ourselves or someone else.

Another issue in determining extravagance is income level. From my perspective many of the high profile actors and actresses live prodigal or extravagant lifestyles. However I would have a hard time explaining to a pastor in Ghana how some of my choices are not extravagant. It would be even more difficult to explain how frugal I am with my money to a person who works all day and at the end may not have earned sufficient money to buy an adequate amount of food for the family.

What Judas said out loud others were thinking. According to Judas' estimate, and it seems he was the one who would know, the perfume Mary poured out was worth about a year's salary for a day labourer.

Think of it— a year's salary – poured out on the feet of Jesus. How do you justify pouring a year's salary on someone's feet? Wouldn't just a little bit do – or that commercial from years past [that some of you have never heard] "A little dab will do you." You might compare it to giving 10,000 roses rather than a dozen!

Was Mary rich? Maybe. Some have suggested that bottle of perfume represented a family heirloom. Whatever the case, Mary-- in prodigal devotion -- made the decision to pour a pint [two cups, 0.57 litres] of very costly perfume on Jesus' feet.

Not only did she pour the expensive perfume on his feet, she also knelt, loosened her hair and wiped his feet with her hair. According to the customs of the day, a respectable woman did not loosen her hair in public. To do so invited social judgment.

Mary's devotion for Jesus was more important than appearances. She may very well have cared about appearances but for her, at that moment, a prodigal act of devotion toward Jesus was supreme in her mind. The anticipated negative thoughts, the gossip, the gasps of breath would not hinder her adoration for Jesus.

Judas' objection was the perfect righteous sounding protest. When we object to something – or if we want to put someone down – it is important that we do it in a spiritual way. When you consider Judas' words closely, they **are** quite convincing. A year's salary spent pouring away too much perfume on Jesus' feet was over the top. When you stop and think of it, **couldn't** the money have been better spent to help the poor? There certainly were people out there who were struggling to get enough food for the day. How could Mary's extravagance be justified in light of so many needs? Surely her act of devotion was too excessive – too costly – too extreme.

Some who heard Judas probably shook their head in agreement. That much money could have helped a needy person for a long time. The people in the room may have begun to view Mary's act as a waste of money.

John provides another insight. Spiritual sounding objections may have nothing to do with the real reason for the objection. We hear it all the time in politics, in the religious community, at work, in our home and sometimes from our own mouths. We don't like what is happening but the reason we don't

like what is happening would sound too selfish or self-centered. So we repackage our complaint and put it in a more acceptable format. It is called “marketing” our complaint so we can look good – even though the real reason may have to do with our own agenda.

John tells us Judas did not care about the poor. What he cared about was the money. He thought to himself, “A year’s salary! Instead of wastefully pouring out all the “money” over Jesus’ feet, put it in the care of my hands. We have bills to pay. Besides with that amount of money in the pouch, it would be easier for me to help myself. Who would notice?” John was blunt. He writes of Judas: “He was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.”

Judas had a point. The poor should not be ignored. But his point had nothing to do with his real motivation. If you compare the gospel accounts, it was shortly after this that Judas goes to the religious leaders and offers to betray Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. He would recoup the money wasted on Jesus. He would sell Jesus into the hands of his enemies.

It would seem that by this time Judas was disillusioned by Jesus. No wonder he objected. If there is someone you don’t like very well, how do you respond or feel inside when someone else is praising that person? We may feel anger – even jealousy— and, of course, we want to correct the one who is saying good things about the person we dislike. “Let me tell you what they are really like...”

Can you understand why Judas objected? He sounded spiritual but spirituality had nothing to do with it. Mary’s act of devotion cut across all he was feeling about Jesus. Judas was not into devotion. He was into betrayal and lining his own pockets. Mary’s act sent him into orbit.

There is another player in this scene as well--Jesus. How would you react if you were Jesus – the center of extreme devotion on the one hand and on the other hand facing a carefully constructed spiritual objection?

If I were Jesus I would not have felt comfortable – in fact, I would be embarrassed and uncertain. What do you do as a man when a woman is pouring a year’s worth of salary on your feet and then wiping them with her hair? That would not be for me. But I am not Jesus – and that is one of the important points of this story.

Jesus was worthy of Mary’s extravagant devotion! Not only was he worthy but as the Christ, the Messiah who would soon die for the sins of the world, he accepted her act of devotion. He was not embarrassed. He graciously received the gift and defended Mary’s actions.

In fact, he quickly put a stop to any outward criticism. He is protective of Mary's actions. He responds to Judas, "Leave her alone." Then he adds, "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."

Mary had it right. Judas and those who may have agreed with him had it wrong. They didn't get it. Just a short time before, Jesus was the one who had said to Mary before "I am the resurrection and the life whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies and whoever believes in me will never die..." After which Jesus walked to the tomb where Lazarus, Mary and Martha's brother, had laid dead for four days. He called to Lazarus to come out of the tomb—and he did! He raised him from the dead. How could Mary NOT be extravagant in her devotion to the one who raised her brother from the dead? How could anyone give too much to the one who is 'the resurrection and the life?'

What we know now that Mary did not know at the time – or was confused about— is that this Jesus she so adored would die on a cross before two weeks were up. He would die because of his love for Mary **and** for you and me. So not only did Jesus raise her brother back to life, he would also die for Mary.

Have you ever had anyone die for you? Stop and think about it for a moment. You have. Jesus died for you. Without his death, you would not have a chance of a positive verdict when standing before a holy God.

Jesus chose death. In I Corinthians, Paul puts it this way, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Was Mary's act of devotion toward Jesus too extravagant, too reckless, or too over the top?

Jesus didn't think so. He didn't ask for such an act from Mary. He may not have expected it but he accepted it without hesitation or embarrassment. He was, after all, the resurrection and the life. In a few short days he would die for Mary.

There are many people who share the opinion of Judas. "Give to Jesus or give to his church? You're kidding me! Why would anyone do that? That is foolishness! Why not give it to some worthy cause?" Or forget about giving to anyone, just spend most of what you get [or in some cases more than what you get] on one's own interests and passions. Take your cue from Judas and the commercials. Extravagance is great. It is encouraged. Do it for yourself or your family. That makes sense. But for Jesus?

As people who are followers of Christ, Judas' opinion should not be held in high regard. He had no loyalty or love for Jesus. He betrayed Jesus and sold his own soul for 30 pieces of silver.

As Christ followers, we are not to be conformed to the world's value system. Paul says, "Don't let the world squeeze you into its mould (Romans 12:2)." What we do or don't do with our money is one measurement of our devotion. It's not the only measurement but is an important guide in understanding the major influences in our life.

In an economy such as ours, we prioritize our spending or impulsively spend our money on the things that are important to us or momentarily grab our attention. So if Jesus does not make it into our use of money in a significant way [a biblical indicator is at least 10 % of our income], what is it saying about our devotion? Can you be devoted to Jesus and not generously give?

What we do know from this story is that Jesus accepts extravagant or prodigal devotion. More than anything or anyone else, he is worthy of our love, our devotion, our time, our attention and our financial resources. He died for us and is our hope for life after death. Through Jesus, God has shown us HIS extravagant love for us. Is his love for you and his worthiness reflected in your actions toward him? Be a prodigal when it comes to showing him your love!