

Gross Extravagance
John 12:1-8
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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All of Judea was preparing for the Passover, the holiest day on the Jewish calendar. In the Upper Room Jesus would reinterpret the Passover meal and center it on himself when he said, "Take and eat, this is my body broken for you." and, "Take and drink, this is my blood shed for you. Do this to remember me."

Jesus' Last Supper was only days away but so was his crucifixion. He knew this. After raising Lazarus from the dead, the news of this miracle had its intended effect, spreading throughout the countryside and into the confines of the Jerusalem Temple.

The priests and the Pharisees, normally adversaries, were now bound together in an unholy alliance to put Jesus on trial for blasphemy and then turn him over to the Romans for execution. They feared that once Jesus proclaimed himself the King of the Jews, their Roman masters would retaliate by destroying the Temple and exile the Jews far away from the Promised Land, this time for good. These religious leaders convinced themselves only by turning over one of their own to the Gentiles that this catastrophe could be averted.

For us, after coming through a long hard winter, spring is finally in the air and suddenly, Holy week is just around the corner. Believe it or not next Sunday is Palm Sunday, the start of Holy Week which signifies the last leg of Jesus pilgrimage to the cross.

Like the religious leaders taking matters into their own hands in the belief they were protecting their way of life, we sometimes find ourselves doing the same thing. We want to protect what we have from crumbling before our eyes. We get defensive when we sense someone is pulling the rug out from under us. That's why it's important to look long and hard at the people and events surrounding the passion of the Christ. We are them and they are us. Hopefully we can learn from their mistakes and get beyond our initial fears and discomfort in order to discover God's will for us, in any given situation.

The priests and Pharisees we're determined to protect what they considered to be the bones and sinew of the Jewish faith, the Law of Moses. They perceived Jesus totally disregarded their time honored traditions and way of life. However, if they took the time to be more discerning, they would've realized nothing was further from the truth.

"I did not come to abolish the law," Jesus said, "but to fulfill it."

As far as Jesus was concerned wiping out the teachings of the Jewish scriptures would be like throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Jesus was not about killing the Law of Moses but breathing new life into it.

There are times when you perceive that what you cherish most is under attack. That's when you must learn to discern between God's will and your own. This is hard but it's meant to be hard because sometimes the ideas and behaviors we've lived with forever need to be crucified with Christ before we can be raised up to new life with Christ.

Sometimes you have to wonder if we're too religious for their own good. Even the most reasonable Christians can find themselves digging in their heels and refusing to see and experience life from a totally different perspective. In short order, that becomes problematic. Only by submitting to Christ can we experience the joy of the kingdom of God. Again, sometimes it's hard and painful but what's the alternative? We can stay the way we are and remain self-satisfied, even self-righteous or we can walk with Jesus to his cross and die with him so we can then be raised up with him on the third day.

This morning's Gospel reading is one of those stops on our pilgrimage to Calvary that must be carefully looked at. It's the story of Jesus' determination to be in sync with the will of God, even though it would cost him everything.

Let's be sure about this, Jesus did not go to his cross filled with bravado. On the contrary, he was sorrowful and scared. How else do you explain that short verse, "Jesus wept," just before he commanded Lazarus to come out of his tomb? Jesus was crying for himself because he knew the moment Lazarus came back to life, he would be heading straight to his death.

We can never imagine what Jesus was going through in those final days. Yes, he was determined but he had to force himself to keep being determined. Otherwise, he would've walked away and disappeared, not to be seen or heard from again. And no one could blame him, because we'd do the same.

According to John, it was six days before the Passover. Already Jerusalem was buzzing with anticipation. This Passover would be historic. Jesus' followers believed he'd publicly proclaim himself the Messiah making the atmosphere in the city expectant and tense.

Aware he was putting himself in harm's way Jesus stopped again in Bethany to visit his good friend Lazarus, who was also on the High Priest's hit list ever since Jesus raised him from the dead.

Choosing to stay with Lazarus, Mary and Martha, you get the sense Jesus needed to be with them. Their home was his home away from home. Here he knew their unconditional love and support. But there was something else Jesus experienced and it came from Mary.

Mary was a contemplative who nurtured a very intimate relationship with God. You remember the story of Jesus having a meal in Lazarus's house. The one sister, Martha, was busy getting the meal ready while Mary sat at Jesus feet. Seeing this, Martha complained, telling Jesus to tell Mary to come into the kitchen and help her.

Jesus answered her, “Martha, Martha, you’re worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:41)

Mary was not easily distracted because more than most people she was in sync with God’s will and always aware of God’s presence. It makes sense that Jesus visited their house because he needed to be comforted by her presence before his rendezvous with cross. Mary was able to give him what very few other people could, that inner peace and calm that comes from God.

Mary must’ve been aware something terrible was about to happen when suddenly the Holy Spirit moved her to pour a pound of expensive perfume over Jesus’ feet. Immediately Judas expressed outrage for this waste of money. He complained the perfume could be sold and the proceeds given to the poor.

His objections seem reasonable. Let’s be prudent, Mary’s extravagance was wasteful. The perfume cost a laborer’s full year’s wages. Even so, Jesus defended Mary. He said, “Leave her alone. She bought it for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor with you but you do not always have me.” (John 12:8)

On numerous occasions beforehand Jesus told his disciples he was going to Jerusalem to die. They refused to listen because they didn’t want to hear it. So for the first time since he set his face towards Jerusalem Jesus was finally comforted, not by the chosen twelve, but through Mary’s extravagant expression of love for her Lord.

“Leave her alone. She bought it for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor with you...”

Jesus was referring to the first half of a verse from the Book of Deuteronomy. Listen to the entire verse. “There will always be poor people in the land.” That’s the verse we tend to quote to justify the reality of poverty in the world but there’s more... “Therefore I command you to be opened handed towards... the poor and needy in your land.”

Certainly on Good Friday we remember Jesus died for our sins but his extravagant love demands a focused response and part of it is found in that complete verse in Deuteronomy. We show our love for Christ by being opened handed to the poor. This is at the heart of the Christian Gospel. As always, Jesus said it best, “Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13.)

Christ’s crucifixion isn’t only about us getting into heaven. It goes deeper than that. His sacrifice for our salvation isn’t limited to the next life, it starts here and now by living in the world as if we’re already living in heaven.

Mary broke open that jar of expensive perfume not knowing that within days his life would be broken open and spilled out over humanity so we in turn can be broken opened and spilled out to lay down our lives for Christ friends, especially the least of these.

Spring, like Holy Week comes suddenly and unexpectedly. We are on the last leg of our pilgrimage to Jerusalem to walk with Jesus before he dies so we can be inspired to live extravagantly with a growing awareness of the kingdom of God emerging within and around us making our expressions of extravagant love possible.