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WHEN A DIAMOND RING IS NOT ENOUGH

John 12:1-8

One of the great movies of all time is *Casablanca*. It has given memorable lines like, “of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine.” And, “Play it, Sam,” “Round up the usual suspects,” and “I have the feeling this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.” It takes place early in World War 2 in Casablanca. The central character, Rick, an embittered man runs a night club. One night his lost love, Ilsa, walks into his club. He believed she had abandoned him when they planned to escape Paris together just before the Nazi army took the city. The love between them is rekindled, but he learns she is actually married to a leader of the resistance. Rick plans a way to get her husband Victor safely out of Casablanca when the Nazis are trying to capture him. In the end, Rick makes the big sacrifice of insisting Ilsa leave with Victor. He gives her up because it is the right thing, but also because he loves her. Loving her means wanting the best for her, even though it means a painful loss for him. The message is when we love someone there is no price we will not be willing to pay to express that love and seek their good.

Since today is Palm Sunday, marking the day that Jesus entered Jerusalem to the shouts of many crying out, “Hosanna!,” I wanted to skip forward in the book of John to the day before Palm Sunday. We are going to look at an incident from John 12:1-8. I wanted us to think about this event because that day Jesus was about to enter the last week of his life, and he knew it. What do you do for someone who is about to die to rescue you?

WHAT MARY DID WAS EXTRAVAGANT

Not long before this event Jesus had accomplished one of his most dramatic and powerful miracles. He had been notified that his good friend, Lazarus was gravely ill. Lazarus’ sisters requested that Jesus come quickly, obviously implying that Jesus could heal him. Jesus did come, but not quickly. He delayed a couple of days, and by the time he finally arrived it was too late. Lazarus had died. It turned out that Jesus wasn’t too late, but right on time. He dealt with the situation by telling his friend to wake up and come out of his tomb, and he did!

As you can imagine everyone was astonished. Jesus had healed people of incurable conditions and diseases, but Lazarus was *dead!* You can’t cure dead. Death is game over. There are no dramatic rallies and comebacks from death. But there was a dramatic comeback that day. Word spread quickly about this incredible feat Jesus pulled off. The day after the events of John 12 Jesus was going to enter Jerusalem to the tumultuous shouts of the crowd as they waved palm branches. The incident we look at today is sandwiched between two dramatic moments, the raising of Lazarus and Jesus’ raucous entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

The leaders of Israel had been opposing Jesus and plotting how to terminate him with extreme prejudice. Jesus knew this, and for the most part had been avoiding them by steering clear of Jerusalem. Later in chapter 12 following the events of the next day Jesus said in verse 27, “Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? Father save me from this hour? No, it was for this very reason that I cam to this hour.” Jesus specifically entered Jerusalem that day because he knew it was time for him to make the ultimate sacrifice. In light of that, this incident is both poignant and appropriate, for it depicts for us a proper response to Jesus’ actions that were about to follow as he gave himself up to rescue the human race.

A dinner was held in Jesus’ honor in the town of Bethany, just outside of Jerusalem. This is where Lazarus lived. It sounds like it was in the home of Lazarus’ family because his sisters, Mary and Martha, were involved. However, Mark and Matthew both say this dinner took place at the home of a man called Simon the Leper. We know nothing about him, but it seems reasonable to conclude that he was no longer a leper or no one would have come near him. It is also likely that he had been healed by Jesus, hence the dinner in his honor.

There was a familiar incident in which Jesus’ sisters threw a party in his honor and Martha got annoyed because she was working so hard to pull the event off while her sister was just sitting and listening to Jesus. John did not record that event in his account of Jesus’ life, but that was consistent with what we see here. Martha was doing what she did. Martha was serving. But Mary did something outrageous. She poured a pint of nard, an expensive perfume, on Jesus’ feet and then wiped them with her hair.

This action was outrageous for several reasons. First, it was an extravagant way to express appreciation and devotion to Jesus. It was extreme because of the expense and the amount of Nard Mary used. The action itself was also outrageous. It was normal for hosts to see to it that their guests’ feet would be washed when they came for dinner. However, that humbling chore was usually performed by a servant using water and a towel. It was highly unusual for a woman like Mary to do that chore to begin with, but to wipe his feet with her hair was almost unheard of. It was not considered appropriate for a woman to let down her hair in that setting. One scholar I read said it was considered almost as scandalous in that culture as it would be for a woman to take off her top in ours. I think that might be a little overstated. Mary’s action caused a reaction in the other guests, but I’m pretty sure if Mary had taken her top off she’d have gotten a much greater reaction than she did. Nevertheless, her action was considered outrageous.

It is fair to imagine that there were some gasps when Mary used her hair to wipe Jesus’ feet. But think about the perfume. Typically perfume today is sold in bottles ranging from 1 to 3 or 4 ounces. That’s because perfume should be used in very small doses. You all have encountered a person who puts on too much perfume, and you know it is overwhelming. I don’t have very effective olfactory senses due to a lifelong struggle with allergy and sinus issues. But even I have had the experience of walking by a perfume store in the mall and almost being sickened by the odor wafting out of the store.

John tells us that Mary poured out a pint of nard on Jesus’ feet. A pint is 16 ounces of perfume! In verse 3 John says, “The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.” Yeah, no kidding. Most perfumes are intended to be used as a brief spray. One small bottle will last for quite some time. Dumping 16 ounces of that perfume on Jesus would have almost been overpowering for everyone in the room.

What Mary did was excessive, extravagant and outrageous. Just washing Jesus’ feet would have been remarkable, but dumping perfume on them was far from the norm. Dumping that much perfume on them was truly extravagant and excessive, and wiping his feet with her hair was scandalous. This causes us to ask the question, why did she do this? She didn’t do it because it was expected. This was not a duty she had to fulfill. In fact, it is so notable because it was so far out of the ordinary. Mary did this because she was so overwhelmed with gratitude and love for Jesus that she felt she had to do something dramatic to show how enormously thankful she was for him. Remember that famous incident when her sister was annoyed because Mary wasn’t helping with dinner preparation. What was Mary doing? She was sitting down listening to Jesus talk. She was one of his most loyal disciples. But something had happened the day before that amped up her appreciation and gratitude for Jesus at quantum levels.

I mentioned Lazarus had been sick, and then he died. There’s something in John 11:20 that we should note. It says, “When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.” Why did Mary stay inside? Because she had to work to prepare for Jesus’ visit? No, Martha might have done that, but not Mary. I believe Mary stayed in the house because she was so upset. Yes, she was upset over the death of her brother, but I believe she was upset at Jesus. He could have helped, but he didn’t bother to come. I think Mary was hurt and somewhat angry with Jesus. She thought so highly of him, but when they needed him, he let them down.

Verse 29 says after Martha had spoken to Jesus, “She went back and called her sister, Mary aside. ‘The Teacher is here and is asking for you.’” Mary wasn’t going to voluntarily go greet Jesus. She only went to talk to him because Martha fetched her and told her Jesus wanted to see her. She wasn’t eager to talk to Jesus. Notice the difference between what Martha and Mary said to Jesus. In verses 21-22 Martha said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.” Verse 32 says Mary told him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” The fact that both women led with the same statement suggests they had talked and agreed that was the case. Jesus could have saved Lazarus if Jesus had only come when they asked. But Martha added that even then God would do what Jesus asked. In other words, she expressed faith in Jesus even then. Maybe it was desperate faith, but she wanted Jesus to know she still believed in him. Mary left that part out. I think it was because she was disappointed by Jesus.

Then Jesus proceeded to do what Martha had hoped against hope that he would do. He gave the two sisters their beloved brother back, fully alive and well. How do you think Mary felt at that moment? Surely the overwhelming emotion was joy. Jesus had done the unthinkable for them! But I also believe there was a bit of shame, even guilt at how she had doubted Jesus. So at that dinner she absolutely had to do something dramatic. She had to tell Jesus how grateful she was and how much she loved him. It had to be as close to spectacular as she could make it.

WHAT MARY DID WAS COSTLY

It is obvious that Mary’s act of devotion was extravagant, but when we consider the cost, which became an issue, we get a sense of just how extravagant it was. Nard was made from a plant that grows anywhere from about 10,000 to 16,000 feet in places like the Himalayas. They took the route of the plant and crushed it to create an oil that is quite aromatic. It was difficult and time consuming to get the oil, then it had to be transported over long distances from the Himalayas or India to get to Judea. Let’s be clear that this was not a matter of putting it on a FedEx plane or even on a train to get there. It had to come by caravan and it would have taken weeks. All this meant it was a costly luxury imported item.

The nard Mary poured out on Jesus was worth 300 denarii. At that time a denarius was considered to be a day’s wage for the average laborer. Most laborers in Judea would work 6 days a week so 300 denarii is roughly a year’s wage. You get the idea of how much this stuff was worth when you consider that the average person would have to work for a year to make enough to buy it. According to the Bureau of Labor statistics the average annual salary in our country is $74,000.

So imagine seeing someone dump perfume worth $74,000 on a person. Not just some of it, but the whole thing. It’s dumped out and it’s all gone. In one fell swoop a year’s wages gone. This act was literally costly because it was so absurdly expensive. This wasn’t just extravagant. Most of us would say it was downright wasteful. Sure, we get wanting to thank Jesus for giving her brother’s life back. But this was too much.

But it was costly in other ways. How do you suppose people reacted to what Mary did? Do you think they said, “Wow, good for Mary. What a beautiful thing she did for Jesus”? We don’t have to guess or assume how people responded because the Gospel writers tell us. John says in verse 5 that Judas objected, “Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor” It was worth a year’s wages.” So human. Make it sound like you have a righteous concern for the poor people that could have been helped. We all know that absolutely was not true. John tells us the truth. Judas was a thief. He wanted the money for himself.

Judas wasn’t the Lone Ranger on that deal. Mark 14:4 says, “some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, ‘Why this waste of perfume?’” Note it was “some” not just one. Then notice that they were indignant. Religious people are often good at indignant. That’s a function of being self-righteous. Mark also reveals that people “rebuked her harshly.” She was severely criticized. The wastefulness was the verbalized criticism, but there were also some horrified objections to how inappropriate and scandalous the whole thing was.

Mary paid a price for what she did. First she paid a literal price because the nard she poured out that day was hideously expensive. Second she paid a social price, being seriously criticized for her actions. None of that mattered to her. She only cared that Jesus knew how thankful she was for him and how much she loved him.

WHAT MARY DID WAS APPROVED BY JESUS

Jesus immediately came to Mary’s defense and said, “Leave her alone.” Then he said it was intended for her to save that perfume for the day of his burial. Notice that he said, “It was intended.” Intended by whom? Jesus meant his Father intended for this to happen. He wanted Jesus to be honored for what he was about to do. The next day he would enter Jerusalem as people waved palm branches and shouted “Hosanna.”

There were a number of symbols used to represent Israel, such as the fig tree and the vineyard. But one of them was palm trees. Waving the palm branches was akin to waving an American flag in our culture. It was a patriotic gesture and it was aimed at nominating Jesus for Messiah. Yelling, “Hosanna” also was associated with Messiah. By entering Jerusalem the next day Jesus was sealing his fate. That’s why he talked about the day of his burial. He knew very well that once he entered Jerusalem the next day he was doomed to die. He essentially said he was a dead man walking, and so it was entirely appropriate for Mary to anoint him the way they would anoint the body of a deceased loved one.

As for all the pious talk about using the money to help the poor, Jesus said, “The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me.” He did not mean that helping the poor was not important. He often spoke of the need to do just that. But there are times when something else might be more important. This was just such an occasion. Unfortunately we always will have the poor with us. That has been a fact of life since the beginning of human history, and it will continue to be until Jesus brings this age to an end. That is an inevitable function of the broken world in which we live.

If helping the poor is the ultimate priority, more important than everything else, then you could never spend money on anything else, because the needs of the poor are infinite. No matter how much you give to help them, it won’t be enough. Whatever you give will be like pouring a bottle of Fiji water on the desert in Death Valley. It will make no appreciable difference in the continued presence of the poor. That does not mean we should ignore the poor and not do anything because we can’t change the situation. We can and should help them, because we can make a difference for one person or several people, and that’s important.

There may be times when we spend money on something other than an absolute necessity instead of giving it to the poor. As an example, Jesus condoned spending money on weddings, even though that money could have been given to the poor. In this case, Jesus said it was appropriate to express love to him in an extravagant way because of what he was about to do. In fact, it is always appropriate to express love to him as the highest of priorities. Remember that the greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Jesus did not say the greatest commandment was to love the poor and help them. He said love God first and foremost, then love your neighbor as yourself.

Why is this story recorded in the accounts of Jesus’ life. It shows up in 3 of the 4 Gospels. It wasn’t a great, insightful speech by Jesus. It wasn’t a powerful miracle that pointed toward Jesus’ identity as the Son of God. So why was this recorded for us? This story tells us that worshiping God extravagantly is not only appropriate, it is important. It supersedes every other priority.

We see this specific message in Mark 14:9, “Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.” The message is, “Look at how much Mary loved Jesus and expressed that love to him. She will always be remembered for this act of love because it is what Jesus deserves.”

APPLICATION

LOVING JESUS IS THE PRIORITY

In a closet at our home there is a reminder of how much Laurie loved me. Every time I see it I remember her love. That reminder is a baseball glove. Throughout most of our adult lives money has been tight. Ministry is not a career choice for someone who wants to be rich. In those early years on my birthday one year Laurie gave me a present. It was a total surprise. It was that baseball glove, a Wilson A2000. I was playing softball with guys from our church. Laurie had gone to a sporting goods store and, even though she knew practically nothing about baseball gloves, she bought me this glove. She essentially asked the sales person what was the best glove they had, and that’s what she bought. I had never had a baseball glove that good, all the way through my years of playing baseball in high school and college. Even today I often notice major league players who use that same glove. I didn’t need a glove that good. It wasn’t an absurd expense like a new car or something, but it was more expensive than we could afford. That money could have gone to much more practical uses. What that glove said to me was that Laurie loved me so much she wanted to do something way too expensive that would tell me how much she loved me. To this day, even though I almost never get to use it anymore, I am thankful not for that glove, but for the love that was behind it. Jesus wants us to express our love to him extravagantly like that.

Joe Stowell wrote in his book, *Loving Christ*, “The mediocrity of our Christianity becomes nakedly apparent when we stop to consider the last time that we did something radical, risky or expensive to simply say to Christ, ‘You are worth it all, and more.’” Worship, expressing our love to God, is the most important thing that we can do. I love to think of expressing love to him in a way that some people might think is not practical, even wasteful. That is just what Mary did that day, and she should always serve as an example for us.

Jesus knew what he was about to do was going to lead to his horrifying execution. Thomas expected going to Jerusalem was going to end badly. I think Mary knew Jesus was about to make the ultimate sacrifice and so she had to honor him. Loving him, honoring him spectacularly, extremely, is always right.

LOVING JESUS IS NOT A DUTY

When I was in college there was a guy named Doug who lived in the dorm room right next to mine. He also played baseball. He was a first baseman and he was a pretty good player. However, his baseball playing days came to an abrupt end. One night he was driving on the freeway when one of his tires blew out. He pulled over to the side of the freeway. These days were I in his shoes I’d call for road service to come change the tire. But he was prepared to change the tire. There, with cars flying by at 70 miles per hour, he got to work changing that flat tire in the dark. He loosened the lug nuts on the flat tire then jacked up the car. That’s when things went very bad. He was never able to explain how this happened, but somehow the car bumper slipped off the jack. The terrible part was he managed to get his hand jammed between the top of the jack and the car. The heavy weight of the car drove that flat topped jack through the palm of his hand. He told me the pain was indescribable. He was in an awful situation. His hand was caught, impaled by the jack and he had no way to get it out. There were no cell phones back then so he had no way to get help. Eventually he was able to use his free hand to rip his shirt off. He began waving his shirt in a desperate attempt to get a driver to stop and help him. It took quite a while, but eventually some compassionate Good Samaritan realized what was going on and stopped to help. He was taken to a hospital and eventually he got his hand repaired, although it was never the same. Thus ended baseball for him.

It makes me cringe when I think of that jack being driven through his hand. I recently smashed my thumb in our car door. It was horrifyingly painful. I can’t even imagine the pain my friend experienced that awful night on that freeway. But I tell you this to draw your attention to what Jesus did. A week after this event the authorities drove spikes through each of his hands. These were not razor sharp spikes. They would have been rather dull and required great force to drive through his hands and his feet. The pain of just that would have been intense, horrific. That was only a part of the pain that he endured when he was tortured and executed. He chose to go through that because he loves us. He loves you and me.

I sometimes wonder why the cross. Why didn’t Jesus come at a time when he could have been executed by a firing squad, or maybe by lethal injection. I get that he had to die as the penalty for all or our sin, but why such an inhuman, terrible way to die? We don’t know for sure, but my guess is at least a part of the reason is he wanted us to have a graphic demonstration of the depth of his love for us.

When we see how greatly he loves us, how there is nothing that can separate us from his love, that should make us grateful, just as Mary was grateful that day. It should fill our hearts with love for him. But we must always remember that love is not a duty or a project to be accomplished. It is a passion that must be expressed. The last Ray Stedman wrote in his book, God’s Loving Word, “Love doesn’t count the cost of expressing itself. It simply delights in giving in order to show what is in the heart.”

In 2019 Laurie and I celebrated our 40th anniversary. I had been saving money for quite some time. Laurie’s wedding ring was a cute little ring that I bought back when I was still a seminary student and had no money at all. The diamond in it wasn’t invisible, but no one looked at that ring and said, “Wow, look at that rock.” She has always been happy with it, but I wanted her to have something better. That became even more of a desire when I realized her ring needed some work. It was old, and the setting was getting a little loose. I was concerned that what little diamond it had was going to fall out. I looked at new diamond rings and gagged. They are so absurdly expensive. They are a serious expense for something totally useless. They don’t do anything. But I realized that’s what makes them an extravagance, a way to loudly say, “I love you.” So I determined I was going to get her a new ring. I did some shopping but was kind of paralyzed, not knowing what to do. Then one day Laurie and I were in a store and she stopped to look at jewelry. She noticed a ring and said, “I love that ring.” I had her try it on, and she loved it even more. I told her I planned to give her a ring for our anniversary, and asked if she would like that one. She practically jumped for joy. We bought her that ring, and I think I was happier than she was because I was able to express love to her in a way that thrilled her. But I have to say as much as I loved getting that ring for her, it wasn’t enough. It doesn’t express how much I love her. I get why Mary dumped perfume worth thousands of denarii on Jesus. Even that wasn’t enough.

Jesus has sacrificed for us beyond our ability to even comprehend. He has given us a gift of inconceivable value. Our response should not be to do some duty, to do what is required. Our response is to be stunned, overwhelmed by his great love for us, to be so grateful for him that we just have to do something extravagant, outrageous, even wasteful to tell him we love him.

LOVING JESUS IS PRACTICAL

I get how we can express love to each other. Every day presents countless opportunities for me to love my wife. But how do you love Jesus when you can’t see him or hear him and certainly can’t touch him? Expressing love to him is much like expressing love to another human in this world. How do you do that? In two ways. You love them by telling them, and you love them by showing them.

I have told you before that to this day I live in amazement that Laurie married me and loves me. I don’t understand why, but I am profoundly thankful for her. So I tell her every day multiple times that I love her. I praise her continually, because I want her to know how astounded I am at the wonderful person she is. I tell her these things because if you love someone, you can’t help it. And if we love Jesus we’re going to tell him. When we gather on Sunday and sing songs of praise and worship to him, that’s what we’re doing. When we tell another person how thankful we are for Jesus and what he has done, that’s a way of expressing love to him. When we tell him in prayer how awesome he is and thank him for all he is and does, we are expressing love to him.

We can also express love by showing it. Recently I have been making a lot of mistakes. I suspect it has to do with the immune treatments. One of the effects both the drugs I have received can cause is confusion. When I saw that it made me think I must have been taking the drugs all my life, because I often feel confused. But I have noticed it being more evident lately. It could be just due to fatigue, which is part of the effect of the drugs. Whatever the case, I’ve done a lot of dumb things and made some bad mistakes lately. Laurie has just continued to be affirming and supportive. She hasn’t berated me for some of the dumb things I have done. She has been unfailingly kind, patient and supportive. She has shown me love by continuing to let me know she loves me and is in my corner, no matter what I do.

The result is I find myself almost frantic to look for ways to show her I love her, serving her in any way I can think of. We can express love to Jesus by showing him. We do that when we choose to serve him in all that we are and do. When we submit to his will we are showing him we love him. When we seek to understand his word and live by it, we are showing him we love him. When we give gifts to him, we are loving him.

Many years ago there was a song we often sang in our church that was kind of unusual. It wasn’t a common song. I don’t believe I ever heard another church sing it. I don’t even know how we came across it, but I loved the song. It was called *Worthy Of More*. Here are some of the words of the song. “I will never understand all the kindness of your hand, but I know I owe you all I am. You are worthy of more than I could ever offer. I am kneeling before your holiness, dear Father. And even as I lay my all at your feet, O Lord, still I know you are worthy of more.”