July 30, 2023

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A DIFFERENT KIND OF GEYSER

John 12:1-11

My senior year in college I took a computer programming class. This was back in the Stone Age when that meant learning how to use an abacus. Just kidding. But this was a long time ago when computers were not as ubiquitous as they are now. The personal computer was still many years away and programming was a rather specialized field. However, I had a summer job where I learned and used a programming language, one that was a fairly demanding language. This class was in another language, one that was easier and more common. Largely because of my previous experience for me the class was very easy. Well before the end of the semester the professor told me that even if I got an F on every remaining assignment and test I’d still get an A in the class because I had done so well up to that point. How hard do you think I worked the rest of the way? I have to admit I kind of cruised through the last part of the class.

We typically think that there are two motivators in most things. There’s the carrot and the stick. Reward and punishment. We think both are needed to get us to do our best. If there is no stick, we won’t be fully motivated. With no fear of punishment I took my foot off the gas a little bit. For many people this causes a problem with the Gospel. The Good News of Jesus is radical because it takes away the stick. It says in Christ you are loved and accepted completely. You are forgiven 100% of all guilt, past, present and future. Nothing will ever separate you from God’s love. Many people try to water down the straight Gospel. Without fear of punishment they fear people will run wild. There is no stick. How is God going to get people to obey?

Today in the book of John we are going to get a look at the real motivation behind the Christian life. It is the true reason for living with passion for our God. It is the reason no stick is needed. We will see it in John 12:1-11.

MARY DID SOMETHING OUTRAGEOUS

After the astounding events in the town of Bethany when Jesus called his recently deceased dear friend Lazarus out of his tomb and Lazarus responded by coming out, a dinner was held in Jesus’ honor. It’s pretty easy to see why. How often do people experience something like that? That would be about once in history. How do you celebrate that? I’m finally getting near the end of the treatments for melanoma that I have been going through since November. The doctor said I’ll be done in 2 more months. Laurie and I hope to celebrate when I’m finished. We have planned to take a trip. But how do you celebrate finishing your treatment for death? How do you thank the man responsible for your miraculous cure?

They threw a dinner party. The other Gospel writers inform us this dinner took place at the home of Simon the Leper. It’s safe to assume that he actually should be called Simon the Former Leper, otherwise no one would go anywhere near his house. We don’t know for certain, but it’s a good bet that Jesus had healed him. John mentions that Martha was serving at the dinner, which is curious since it wasn’t her house. But I think John added that comment as a little snippet of humor. Of course Martha was serving. It’s what she did. What else would she be doing? We know from Luke at a previous dinner for Jesus Martha was a little harried in all her efforts to serve Jesus, because when you served Jesus you also had serve at least 12 other guests. She got her nose out of joint because her sister Mary was not helping, but was sitting at the feet of Jesus. I’m pretty sure Mary was the younger sister. Martha was the responsible older sibling and she got miffed that Mary wasn’t doing what Martha thought was her fair share. I identify with Mary, because I still get grief from my older brother because he didn’t feel I did my fair share of work when we dug a hole for a swimming pool *almost 60 years ago*. Hey, bro, time to let it go, don’t you think? Anyway, I think John put that comment about Martha in just to get a chuckle. Yeah, that’s what good old Martha would do, all right. Or perhaps John was telling us that Mary had her way of thanking Jesus and Martha had hers. Martha’s way was serving.

Once again, Mary was at the feet of Jesus. Only this time she did a lot more than just listen to him teach. Verse 3 says that Mary took a pint of pure nard and poured it on Jesus’ feet. This act was outrageous for several reasons. It was expected that a good host would see to it that the feet of guests at their home would be washed. As you know, they wore sandals back then, and they didn’t walk on mostly paved roads. They walked everywhere they went. They walked through dirt. And remember who else walked on those dirty roads and trails. Sheep, oxen, horses, goats, cows, dogs, chickens, all of them at various times walked down the byways, and would leave reminders of their passing. At the end of a day you can be quite sure that people’s feet were trending heavily toward the disgusting end of the scale. So the custom was that someone washed them. Only that would typically be an undesirable task performed by whatever servant was lowest on the totem pole. It would not be done by the host or by another guest. But Mary stepped in and took over that job in Jesus’ case, and that would have been shocking to most of the other guests, because Mary was a person of considerable standing. This was not something a person like her would typically do. Martha might show Jesus how much she loved him by bustling around, working hard to serve everyone, but what Mary did was in another league altogether.

What was even more surprising is that she didn’t just wash Jesus’ feet with soap and water, which would have been the norm. She anointed his feet with nard. John tells us it was “pure nard.” That sounds to me like an expression that would be useful today. If you told me that the Padres were still going to go on a nearly miraculous run and actually make it to the playoffs this year, I’d say, “That’s pure nard.” It’s a bunch of nonsense. But that’s not what pure nard meant.

Nard was a costly perfume that was imported mostly from northern India. The Roman historian Pliny said it smelled like gladiolus perfume. It was so expensive that sometimes it was diluted with lesser ingredients. But not Mary’s stuff. It was the real deal, pure nard. Think about how much she used. Perfumes today typically come in bottles of 1 to 3 ounces. That’s because it should be used sparingly. A brief spray of it is all you need. Have you ever been around a person who used too much perfume? It can be overpowering. But, according to John, Mary used what he called a *litra* of the stuff on Jesus. That was the Greek word John used to describe how much there was. It was the word we derive “liter” from, but it didn’t mean a liter, nor did it mean a pint. It referred to a unit of measure that was almost 12 ounces. John tells us the fragrance filled the room. I guess. Dump out that much perfume and it will be overwhelming.

What is outrageous and extravagant about this is how much that amount of nard cost. Judas, as we will see, objected because that much nard “was worth a year’s wages.” John’s original text literally says it was worth 300 denarii. A denarius was generally considered a day’s wage for a common laborer. So 300 of them would be about a year’s wage. Let’s put that in today’s context. Minimum wage now is $15 per hour. So if a full day is 8 hours that comes out to $120 a day. Multiply that by 300 days and you get $36,000! Mary poured the equivalent of $36,000 worth of nard on Jesus! Yikes. That is beyond extravagant. For that much money she could have bought him a Mercedes Benz GLA 250 SUV. Or if she bought into the EV hype she could have bought him a Tesla Model 3 with room to spare. That’s a lot of nard. I might even say it was pure nard to do something that extravagant.

Mary wasn’t done. Jesus’ feet were now wet. She had to dry his feet. I’m sure she could have somehow laid her hands on a towel to use for that job. But that wasn’t good enough for her. She dried his feet with her hair! Eww. Gross! I can’t imagine doing that, probably in part because I don’t have enough hair to dry off anything. But this action was more extravagant and outrageous than it even seems to us today, and it seems pretty outrageous. In that culture women did not let their hair down in public. I don’t know why. Maybe it was because they didn’t shampoo it much and their hair was often nasty. But it became a cultural thing. It just wasn’t done. One scholar said a woman letting her hair down in a public setting was considered as scandalous as if a woman today went topless in a public setting. I don’t understand that. But whether I get it is irrelevant. That was how they saw it, and for Mary to not only let her hair down but then to wipe Jesus’ feet with it was basically an X-rated scene.

MARY WAS CRITICIZED FOR HER ACTIONS

Mary just trampled all over a few cultural norms and taboos there. The reaction wasn’t long in coming. Judas voiced what others were thinking. This act by Mary was wasteful. Think about what could have been done with that much money. Through World Vision you can feed a hungry third world child for $30 a month, or $360 per year. With $36,000 you could feed 100 hungry kids for a year. That’s a huge deal, and Mary traded that for dumping perfume on Jesus’ feet when all that was needed was some soap and water. That is pure nard if you ask Judas. It was wasteful to a degree that was downright sinful.

Of course, Judas wasn’t actually concerned about the poor. It was only later that they discovered that Judas, who was the disciples’ Chief Financial Officer, was skimming off the top of the contributions they were receiving. He was embezzling, and he was thinking how much he could have raked in if Mary had cashed in that nard and donated it to the Jesus cause.

However, Judas was not the only person who objected to Mary’s outrageous actions. Mark 14:4 says, “Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, ‘Why this waste of perfume? It could have been sold for more than a year’s wages and the money given to the poor.’” Matthew’s account in Matthew 26:8 tells us some of the disciples were among that grousing group. Notice that not only were they objecting, they were indignant. Religious people are often good at being indignant. Their religious sensibilities were offended by this outrageous action. Mark says they rebuked her harshly. They let Mary have it with both barrels.

So Mary was judged and criticized by others at the dinner, especially by Jesus’ disciples. The primary objection had to do with the extravagant and wasteful cost of the perfume, but you can be sure there were some gasps and quite a few comments about how scandalously inappropriate Mary’s behavior was.

MARY WAS COMMENDED FOR HER ACTIONS

Jesus’ response to all this indignation was quite different. Verses 7-8 tell us he said, “Leave her alone. 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.” Jesus approved of what she did, likening it to anointing his body when he was buried, which he knew was going to happen soon. But note that he said, “It was intended.” He didn’t say, “She intended it.” He was saying that she was doing what God the Father intended her to do. Her actions were directed by and obviously approved by God.

Jesus was much in favor of helping the poor. But he also said, “The poor you will always have among you.” In a fallen world there will always be poor people. No matter how much a person gives to help the poor, they are not going to fix the problem. That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t bother giving to the poor, because we can all help at least one person and while it may not solve the poverty problem for the whole world, it will make a difference for that person. However, because the problem of the poor is so intractable, one could give every penny and have nothing for other important things and it wouldn’t fix the poverty problem.

Jesus was not going to be physically around for very much longer. They had a limited opportunity to actually minister to him directly, so this was a chance to do something vitally important. We need to remember that Jesus said the most important command, the highest priority, is to love God with all our resources. That’s what Mary was doing. As important as caring for the poor is, worshiping, expressing love to God is even more important.

IMPLICATIONS

LOVING JESUS IS THE PRIORITY

Deuteronomy 15:11 says, “There will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, you shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor in your land.” Psalm 41:1 says, “Blessed is the one who considers the poor. In the day of trouble the Lord delivers him.” Proverbs 14:21 says, “Blessed is he who is generous to the poor.” God commands caring for the poor and says that it should be important to us.

But that isn’t the greatest commandment. In Matthew 22:37 Jesus was asked by one of the Jewish religious experts what the greatest, most important commandment was. He said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” It is even more important than caring for the poor. In fact, it is the motivation behind caring for the poor. Loving Jesus is the priority. Not a priority. It is not one of the important things we should do. It is the most important thing. It rules over everything else. It is to be the motive that is behind everything we are and everything we do.

Jesus said the absolute most important thing we must do is to love God. But we have also seen that he has now essentially said that he is God in human form, so loving him is the most important thing in life. Someone might object that it sounds more than a little self focused for Jesus to say that the most important thing we can ever do is to love him. Doesn’t that make him sound kind of narcissistic?

To help us wrap our heads around this we should ask ourselves, why do I do what I do? What is my motivation behind my behavior and my actions? I submit to you that the default setting for all of us, the motivation behind everything we do, is we love ourselves. Why do I work? To make money so I can provide as comfortable a life for myself as is possible. Why do I love others? Because it is in loving them that I experience joy and life. Why do I try to achieve accomplishments and find success in the world? Because that makes me feel better about myself. Why do I exercise? Because I want to be healthy. Down at the bottom of everything I say, everything I do, is a desire to take care of me. I am loving me, and that is involved at every minute of every day in everything I do. That’s just how humans are. We disguise that as much as we can. We learn to control it to some extent. But it is always there. The bottom line when we evaluate everything amounts to “how does this affect me? What do I get out of it?”

Someone might object, “I’m not that selfish.” Recently I had a strange thing happen when I was working on my computer. It began behaving in bizarre ways. I would try to type things and nothing would show up on the screen. I tried several things to try to fix the problem but nothing was working. Then I saw an odd notice pop up on the screen, one I’ve never seen before. It said, “You are holding down the control key.” You know that holding that key down changes everything you try to do. That’s when I started arguing with my computer. I said, “I am not.” My hands weren’t even on the keyboard, so how could I be holding down the control key? I insisted the problem had to be with the computer, not the user, meaning me. But my denying it did not mean it wasn’t true. I punched the control key, and all of a sudden everything began working normally. I had done something to keep that control key in the on position somehow. So what does that mean? Our human obsession with self is like having the control key pushed. It affects everything. Nothing works right because that key is pushed. Claiming it’s not true of us doesn’t change the reality. I thought I didn’t have the control key held down, but somehow I caused that to happen, whether I thought I did or not. We are all infected with this addiction to self, whether we admit it or not.

The problem with this is that self orientation is behind all of the pain and suffering in the human race. Laurie and I were taking care of two of our youngest grandchildren recently. One is 2 years old, the other a year and a half. I watched them sort of playing together. They walked around together. When Bria, the 2 year old, started playing with something, her little brother would try to take it away because he wanted it. Then Bria would push him away. Then the crying would begin. I was watching the human condition play out in front of me. No one taught them that. It’s just there. Parents work to teach their children to control that self obsession. A large part of maturity is learning to limit it, but the problem is all we do is limit it, we don’t eradicate it.

God knows what we need is to somehow replace that orientation. The thing that replaces it is loving him, because he is true good, the embodiment of love and goodness, instead of loving self. So we are to have this new way of living. We have a new motivation for everything we do. Why do I work? The motive is I do it to love God. Why do I love my wife? The motive is to love Jesus. Why do I spend my money the way I do? The motive is to love Jesus. Why do I exercise and try to be healthy? The motive is to love Jesus. This is to be the center, the motive for everything we do. It is what the Christian life is all about. This changes the whole equation of how people are and how they relate.

I have mentioned that this has been a year of credit card difficulties for us. There was a period of time when our card was unavailable, so we decided to get a different card. Laurie called the company and we were approved. Laurie got her card about 3 days later. But one never came for me. We waited a couple of weeks, then Laurie called the company. She had to go through the process of getting them to issue a card to me, even though she had already done it. They said it was approved and they would send the card. It’s been two weeks, and no card has shown up. They notified me that the statement for my account is now available on line. I find that remarkable. I have an account, there is a statement for it, but I have no idea what they account number is and I don’t have a card! Then it got even better. They just sent me a check refunding the annual fee for this invisible account! How can they be so incompetent? We’re going to have to deal with it, and frankly, I’m annoyed. But I have to ask, what will determine how we relate to them? What needs to rule that interaction is the desire to love God. That will make a big difference.

LOVE MUST BE EXPRESSED

This passage is powerful because it demonstrates in a vivid way an obvious truth about love. When you love someone, you have to express it. Love needs to get out. It needs to be shown. Mary was so grateful to Jesus and loved him so much she had to let that love out. I’m sure many of you have been to Yellowstone. I mean the National Park, not the TV series. I was there as a kid but I have no memory of it. However, I know there are a lot of geysers there, the most well known of them being Old Faithful. For a long time I was under the misconception that Old Faithful erupted like clockwork. But it’s not quite that regular. It does erupt on a fairly predictable basis every hour to 90 minutes or so. Experts can predict when the next eruption will be with a 10 minute margin of error based on how long the current eruption lasts. Though it doesn’t have a schedule like a train might, it keeps erupting day and night without ever stopping.

What causes those eruptions? There is continual geothermal activity in that area that heats the water under the ground. When the water in underground chambers reaches boiling temperature, it erupts, shooting more than 100 feet in the air, and continuing for 2 to 5 minutes until the heat reduces. Why am I talking about a geyser? Because when that water underground hits boiling temperature the pressure gets so high it has to be released. Love is a little bit like that. When there is real love in our hearts, it has to be released. It has to come out in some way. That’s what happened to Mary. Her love for Jesus was at a boiling point, and it simply had to come out. This extravagant anointing of Jesus was the result.

The idea of loving Jesus can be a little difficult for us to conceptualize at times. How do we express love to Jesus? Writer Gary Chapman published a book back in 1992 titled *The Five Love Languages*. The first year it sold less than 9000 copies. But it began building momentum and eventually grew into a best seller. It was on the *New York Times* best seller list from 2009 to 2013. The premise of the book is that we all have a primary way of receiving and giving love. Chapman’s list of 5 ways we do that were affirmation, quality time, giving gifts, acts of service and affection or touch. I’m a little averse to systems of categorizing people in general. And I find that my love language is all of them. Leave any one of them out and I won’t feel loved. But that’s not why I mention this book. It’s interesting that it is about love languages. The premise is that love must be expressed. That’s what language is about.

What is Jesus’ love language? Well, it’s kind of all of them. We express love to him by affirming him. In his case we would call that praise and worship. By spending quality time with him, in his case prayer and living in his presence. We love him by serving him and by giving him gifts, rejoicing in the opportunity to give money to him. We can’t touch him, but we can have affection for him.

EXTRAVAGANCE IS APPROPRIATE FOR LOVE

According to a survey done last year, the average cost of an engagement ring was $6,000. Are you kidding me? For a ring? What does it do? It doesn’t do anything. You just wear it on your finger. It doesn’t have any useful functions at all. It’s not like an Apple Watch or a Fit Bit. That seems outrageous. But people pay that every single day, and no one bats an eye. Why? Because it is an expression of love. When love is being expressed, the more extravagant the better.

In Matthew 26:10 Jesus said of Mary’s actions, “She has done a beautiful thing to me.” His opinion was that this was a beautiful action. In fact, according to Matthew he went on to say in verse 15, “Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her.” Jesus was right. Here we are, 2000 years after these events happened, living in a place on the other side of the world from Bethany, in a culture so different from that one that they have little in common. Yet in this very different place and time we are still talking about Mary’s extravagant expression of love and applauding her for it.

Laurie and I spend a lot of time with our grandchildren, especially Laurie. There have been people who tell us we do too much. I don’t know how you gauge what is too much, but all I can say is, we can’t help ourselves. We’d do anything for our kids and our grandkids, because we love them. When we were recently on vacation we had a few days to ourselves. We ended up looking for and buying some clothes for the grandkids. We spent considerable time in a toy store finding toys to buy for them. They have lots of clothes and toys. In fact, at times I fear the kids are going to have to move out of their homes because there’s no more room for them. All the space is taken up by their toys and clothes. But we can’t stop ourselves. We love them, and love has to be expressed, and extravagance is appropriate. This past week we spent considerable time with the grandkids, but we added a new wrinkle. Toby and Anna have a dog, Banjo, who has gotten old and is having some health issues. This has made him a bit cranky. They asked if he could come stay at our house for a couple of days as a break for him. We love them, so we said of course. And while he was at our house, poor Banjo had an episode that could happen to very elderly people, and he wasn’t wearing his Depends. In the distant past Laurie was featured in a commercial for a carpet cleaner product. It actually worked. She swears by the stuff. She had to employ it copiously this week. She did so willingly, without grudging, because we were loving our kids. We love them extravagantly. That’s appropriate, and it is appropriate to love Jesus even more so.

At one point David failed to live by the principle what God supplies is enough. He acted as though his strength was in the size of his army, even though his top general tried to show him another way. Israel experienced consequences because of it and David realized what he was doing and confessed it to the Lord. God told him in 2 Samuel 24:18, “Go up and build an altar for the Lord on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.” David did that. When David told Araunah he wanted to buy his threshing floor, Araunah insisted that he would be happy to give it to David for free, plus animals to sacrifice. In verse 24 David said, “No, I insist on paying you for it. I will not sacrifice to the Lord my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing.” He was there to express love to God through sacrifice, through something extravagant. If it didn’t cost him anything it would not be extravagant, and it wouldn’t be a sacrifice. He insisted on paying for it because he wanted to express his love to God.

In his book, *Loving Christ*, Joe Stowell wrote, “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.’”

LOVE ISN’T A DUTY, IT IS A GRATEFUL RESPONSE

When religious people insist there has to be some stick to keep God’s people in line, obey him or else, they turn obeying him into a duty. He sense you when you’re sleeping, he knows when you’re awake, he knows if you’ve been bad or good, so be good for goodness sakes. If you’re bad you end up on the naught list and get a chunk of coal in your stocking. The only reason you will like Santa is he gives you good stuff. That’s not the Gospel. That turns serving God into duty and working to convince him to give us good stuff, which is what we really want. The Gospel says he himself is the good stuff we need and want, and he has already freely given himself.

I recently was attacked by some kind of bug. I don’t know for sure what kind, but I think it was a mosquito. When that encounter took place I had a reaction. I got that little red bump that itched like crazy. My body didn’t say, “I just got bitten by that bug. What is my duty to do when that happens? Oh, I know, I can have the attack site get red, swollen and start itching.” What happened wasn’t a duty, it was the natural response of my body to what that bug did. It just happened, no will or effort involved.

Wait, are you saying loving God is like being bitten by a mosquito? Love is like an itchy annoyance when you’ve been bitten by the love bug? Well, not exactly, but kind of. I’m saying that the need to express love isn’t an expected duty, it is a natural response of gratitude and humility to the person who has done so much to love you.

I had a relative who made a big thing about thank you notes. When she gave a gift she expected to receive a thank you note. She happened to have a real gift when it came to making people feel guilty, and she would exercise that gift if she didn’t get the expected thank you note. That had an interesting effect on me. Writing the thank you note was a duty. I did it not because I was thankful but because I knew she’d let it be known that I was a substandard human being if I didn’t send her the note. It was a chore.

Do you think when Mary poured out that perfume on Jesus that it was a chore she felt she had to do? Absolutely not. There was no conversation where she asked someone, “What is the expected response when a person brings your deceased beloved brother back to life? What is the socially accepted way to say thank you?” That conversation never happened. No one ever suggested to her, “You know, a really nice way to say thank you in that situation is to dump out a $36,000 bottle of perfume on them.” Mary did that because she was so grateful she couldn’t stop herself. She absolutely had to do something, and it had to be something outrageous and beautiful.

It is crucial that we remember that doing something radical or expensive to tell Jesus how much we love him begins with being astounded and overwhelmed by his grace, his goodness and his love for us. If we turn this into a duty it becomes drudgery. And here’s the crucial point. Do you want people to express love to you because they have to, they are expected to do so? Do you want them to love you dutifully? Well, that’s better than not loving me at all. Perhaps. I just know that I don’t want Laurie to think about expressing love to me because it’s expected. I don’t want my kids to stress about giving me something on Father’s Day or my birthday because it’s what you’re supposed to do. I want them to love me so much that they can’t help themselves, they have to do something because they are so thankful for me. Should we be surprised that Jesus wants the same thing from us? It starts with us having our hearts full of love and gratitude because of who Jesus is and what he has done for us and continues to do for us every day of our lives.

Here’s a question that I believe is worth thinking about for us today. If you had been at that dinner and observed what Mary did, what would your reaction have been? I considered that question, and have to admit that I very likely would have been in the indignant party. Why this is wasteful, and frankly I’m appalled that woman doesn’t have any sense of propriety. I’m scandalized. That saddens me. What I would like to believe is that if I had been there I’d have thought, “You go girl! I wish I’d thought of that. Jesus is worth all of that and far more.”

God has given us life. He has showered us with his love and patience. He has allowed his own Son to die horribly to rescue us. He has given us blessing upon blessing. He is good, loving, kind, patient, righteous, just, wise, and sovereign, worthy of all praise. The more we appreciate him for who he is, the more thankful we are, the more we will love him and will fill the urgency of expressing that love. It is not a duty. If it’s duty, it’s not love. So we love him freely and joyfully, and do everything we can to express that love in the most profound ways possible.