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SOMETHING EVEN BETTER THAN A BASEBALL GLOVE

John 12:1-8

We helped Toby and Anna move this weekend. They moved out of their 2 bedroom condo into a 3 bedroom house because their family is expanding. Among the possessions we had to transfer were Toby's surfboards. He has enough to open a board shop, I think. But my attention was caught by one particular board. One of his friends from med school was assisting in the move and Toby tried to give him this surfboard. He no longer uses it. But that board is a special board, and I remembered it very clearly.

Toby always presents us with a dilemma at Christmas. He is not demanding, usually says anything we give will be great, but he almost always has something he really wants, and it is almost always horribly expensive. It often is hockey equipment. Do you know how costly hockey goalie equipment is? It is absurd. This one particular year though the thing he wanted most wasn't hockey equipment, it was a surfboard. He had several, but his favorite one had come to the end of its useful life and he needed to replace it. He had found one that he wanted really badly, the perfect board for him, but there was no way he could afford it. Unfortunately there was no way we could afford it either. We told him we'd love to get him the board for Christmas, but it just wasn't possible, so what else might he like? He didn't know, but said he'd be happy with anything.

Laurie and I went into a surf shop thinking maybe we could find something surf related that might be an acceptable present. And there it was, the very board he wanted so badly. It was on sale! The sale price, unfortunately, just made it not affordable instead of outrageously, laughably not affordable. Both Laurie and I dearly wished we could get it for him. It would be so fun to surprise him with it, but it was just a no go. It turned out that one of the employees at the store was a friend that we visited with for a bit. We explained that we were shopping for Toby and trying to find something he might like. Somehow the board came up in our conversation, and our friend said, "Just a minute. I'll be right back." Our friend came back and said, "Would you be interested in that board if you could buy it for this price" and named a significantly reduced price. We looked at each other and said, "It's still too much. We shouldn't." And then we bought it.

We looked forward to that Christmas Eve when we opened our presents with great anticipation. We pulled the Red Ryder BB gun trick on Toby. We all opened all

our presents. It was obvious he was grateful for the gifts we gave him, but wasn't thrilled with anything. He was just thankful that we loved him. But then we said, "Oh, wait, we forgot. There's one more thing for you Toby." We had it hidden and we directed him to the board. He practically burst with surprise and joy when he saw that board. He was totally flabbergasted. And boy was he happy and thankful. Man that was a lot of fun. I will never forget it. It was extravagant, but it was a blast. Giving it was ridiculously fun even though it was costly. Today I want to talk about doing something similar, something that will give us all a lot of joy. Let's look at John 12:1-8.

MARY EXPRESSED LOVE TO JESUS

In chapter 11 Jesus did the greatest of his miracles, raising his friend, Lazarus, from his grave. Several days later Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, threw a feast honoring Jesus. The next day Jesus was going to enter Jerusalem to the shouts of crowds of people on the day we know as Palm Sunday setting in motion the events of the final week of his life. Jesus was very much aware of what was about to happen. In 12:23 he said, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." By that he meant completing his mission by dying on the cross.

His followers didn't know what was going to happen, but they did have a sense that the situation was dire. When Jesus announced his intention to go to the Jerusalem early in chapter 11 his disciples tried to dissuade him because of the animosity of the leaders of the nation. But he insisted so in 11:16 Thomas said, "Let us also go that we may die with him."

During the feast at her house Mary poured out a pint of expensive perfume on Jesus' feet. That's a lot of perfume. Typically today you would buy a one ounce bottle of perfume and it lasts a long time. An entire pint of perfume is a huge amount. Verse 3 says, "the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume." That's not surprising given that she dumped 8 ounces of perfume out on his feet. Then Mary proceeded to dry Jesus' feet by wiping them with her hair.

Mary's actions were highly unusual. But it is crucial to understand why she did this. It was normal to wash the feet of guests in one's homes. However, normally that task was done by a servant. It was usually done with water then the servant dried the feet with a towel. In this case Mary, one of the hostesses did it, and she didn't use water, she used some outrageously expensive perfume. Then she dried his feet not with a towel but with her hair. In case you wondered, that was not standard practice. It was a remarkable, humbling act of devotion.

Mary didn't do this because it was expected. It was not a duty. No one expected her to wash Jesus' feet. Using a pint of perfume was a total shock. And drying his feet with her hair was unheard of. Nothing about what Mary did was an expected duty. Neither did she do this because she was trying to get something from Jesus. She was desperate to express to him how grateful she was to him and how much she cared about him. It was an action that no one who witnessed it would ever forget. John wrote this account perhaps as many as 50 years after the events and he remembered it vividly.

Early in this chapter Lazarus, Mary's brother, had become gravely ill. Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus, obviously requesting that he come immediately. They knew Jesus had the power to heal. If he could get there before it was too late he could save Lazarus, they were sure of it. Jesus had an inexplicable response to their request. John 11:6 says, "When he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days." That's a really poor response time to a 911 call.

During that delay Lazarus died. Poor Mary was devastated. She was just destroyed by her brother's death. When Jesus finally did show up according to 11:32 a weeping Mary fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." In her mind she knew Jesus could have saved him and he chose not to do so. How was she supposed to ignore that? There was at least an element of bitterness in her statement.

Mary could never have imagined what was about to happen. As long as Lazarus was alive there was a chance, but after he died it was ballgame over. The fat lady had sung. Once you're dead, you're dead and there's no more that can be done. A disease can be stopped and even reversed, but death is a one way street. There's no coming back from that.

That's what Mary thought. That's what everyone thought. And they were all dead wrong. We are familiar with the story. Jesus did the thing that absolutely no one thought was even a possibility. He told Lazarus, now thoroughly dead for 4 days, to get up and come out of his tomb, and he did it. Jesus knew what he was going to do all along and that's why he waited. He wanted Mary and Martha and his disciples to know that he even had power over death.

Jesus gave Lazarus his life back. He gave Mary and Martha their brother back when they were sure he was gone forever. How do you say thanks for that? Just giving a feast to honor Jesus wasn't enough for Mary. She probably felt bad about being a little bitter at Jesus, but mostly she was so full of gratitude and joy that she

didn't know what to do with herself. I certainly can understand that. I've lost a son and a father. What if, somehow, Jesus had shown up and brought them back to life? How do you respond to that? How do you tell him how inexpressibly grateful you are and how much you love him? Mary's way of doing that was this shockingly unorthodox action. It is crucial to remember the motive of Mary's act. It was driven by pure, overwhelming gratitude and love.

MARY'S ACT WAS COSTLY

Just how deeply grateful Mary was can be gauged by how costly this action was. First, the perfume itself was financially costly. This perfume, called nard, was really expensive. There is a plant called *nardostachys jatamansi* that grows in the Himalayas anywhere from about 10,000 feet up to about 16,000 feet. They take the root of that plant and crush it to make an oil that is highly aromatic. That's where nard came from.

In order for it to arrive in Bethany in Israel it had to be harvested from high up in the Himalayas then transported from India in sealed alabaster containers. This was a luxury imported item, maybe the Chanel No. 5 of their day. Judas, the disciples' CPA, objected to this wasteful extravagance. He insisted the perfume should have been sold and the money given to the poor. I can understand why. A huge sum of money was involved here. John notes that Judas didn't care about the poor at all, but he did care about the money. Apparently he did some creative accounting.

The text says the perfume was worth a year's wages. In today's terms, if we take \$15 an hour as our minimum wage and work 8 hours, that's \$120. Do that for 5 days and you have \$600 a week. Do that for 50 weeks a year and you get \$30,000. Mary dumped \$30,000 worth of perfume on Jesus' feet in one fell swoop!

Chanel has a perfume called *Le Grand Extrait* that is the purest form of Chanel No. 5. It sells for \$4,200 per ounce, so 8 ounces of it would go for \$33,600. That's close to the level of Mary's Nard, but not quite. What would you think if you saw someone dumping a whole pint of that Chanel perfume on someone? It would be totally outrageous. Way over the top. It would be completely unnecessary. You'd probably yell, "Stop! What are you doing? Are you insane? Do you know how much that stuff costs?" It would be extravagant to pour a whole ounce on someone, but a whole pint? That's just nuts.

I feel confident in believing that Mary and her family were pretty well off. They had a big enough home to host dinners for Jesus, and they were able to foot the bill for everyone's food. But \$30,000 is a lot of money. That's almost a brand new

BMW X1 or a Mercedes GLA, or a year of medical school. That nard cost her a bundle!

Not only did it cost a whole bunch of money, it also cost her some serious criticism. Judas had ulterior motives when he criticized Mary, but there were others thinking the same thing. There was undoubtedly a lot of “tsk, tsking” going on. I suspect at least a few had some disapproving words for Mary. No one had ever seen anything so wasteful, and religious people are usually quick to identify poor stewardship.

However, it wasn't just the money that would have earned her some serious criticism. First of all, just washing Jesus' feet was not really appropriate for her. Normally one would have a servant do it, so it required considerable humility for Mary to do this. But more to the point it was not really appropriate for a woman to wash a man's feet. So she would have been criticized for ignoring that social barrier. But it was the thing with the hair that was really over the top. In that culture women did not let their hair down in public. One scholar said that it would have been the equivalent of a woman going topless in our culture. Yeah, how's that going to fly in a religious environment? So when Mary dried Jesus' feet with her hair she crossed over the line from outrageously wasteful and inappropriate to scandalous.

Mary knew quite well what people would think, and she didn't care. All that mattered to her was that Jesus and everyone else knew how profoundly thankful she was for Jesus and how devoted to him she was.

JESUS APPROVED OF MARY'S ACTION

The criticism of Mary was quick to come, but Jesus put a stop to it. He told Judas and everyone else to “leave her alone.” Then he said that her action was appropriate. In fact, he said, “It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial.”

The first thing that is surprising about this statement is that Jesus was still alive. He was not being buried. He was speaking figuratively and prophetically here. No one would complain if a woman anointed the dead body of a man. In fact, on the day of his resurrection some of the women went to Jesus' tomb with the intent of doing just that. Jesus was saying, “she's anointing the body of a dead man walking.” I doubt that any of them, Mary included, fully understood what Jesus meant. In this case he was in a sort of oblique way telling them that he was about to die. There was a burial in store for him very shortly.

Then Jesus said, “You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.” Wow, Jesus, that’s kind of insensitive to the poor, isn’t it? Jesus was not insensitive to the poor. On numerous occasions he talked about the need to care for the poor and give to them. However, the unfortunate reality of this world is that we will indeed always have the poor with us. The needs of the poor will never go away and will always be so vast that they could suck up every resource we have. We could use the needs of the poor as the reason for never doing anything with money other than giving to the poor.

If today we said giving to the poor was more important than anything else, then we would never take our spouses out on a date, never eat at a restaurant, never have more than one or two pairs of shoes, never go on a vacation, never go to a sports event or a play, probably wouldn’t have any pastoral staff at our church and probably wouldn’t live in this area because it is way too expensive. That money could be given to the poor. The problem is you could give everything you have, every dollar beyond what is absolutely necessary for you to survive on beans and rice, and you wouldn’t even make a dent in the state of the poor in this world. That’s not an excuse for not helping the poor, it is simply a statement of fact. Suppose Mary had given that \$30,000 to the poor. Would that have made any difference in the level of poverty in Jerusalem? No.

Jesus said that what Mary did was entirely appropriate. In light of the sacrifice Jesus was about to make this action was not extravagant at all. In fact, it was merely a token. Yes, \$30,000 seems like an absurd sum of money to spend on one act of devotion. But how do you compare that with being tortured and executed on a cross? How does that sum compare with leaving glory in the presence of the Father to live in this dark and broken world? It seems to me in comparison \$36,000 was at best a mere pittance.

I am always astounded by how Laurie loves me. We have now been married 13,359 days. I still feel the wonder and the joy I felt on March 14, 1979 when she agreed to marry me and on August 24, 1979 when she fulfilled that promise at our wedding ceremony. I am not kidding when I say for all those days, to this very moment I have wondered if one day she is finally going to wake up and say, “what was I thinking? Why did I marry this clown? It must have been temporary insanity. I could have done so much better.” She traded in everything else she could have done in life, everyone else she could have married, for me! And to this day both in what she does and what she says to me she astounds me with how she lavishes love on me. There’s no way I can ever express both how grateful I am to her and how

much I love her. Her love literally changes how I feel about myself. I see a lot in me that is disappointing. I don't feel I have done all that well in life. I know people who don't think much of me and the world takes exactly zero notice of me. But Laurie loves me, and that makes it all right. It is immeasurably more important to me that she loves me and thinks highly of me than what anyone else may think. Her love changes my whole life. I wish and often dream of doing something to express my gratitude to Laurie that would blow her away. I occasionally come up with schemes of dramatic surprises for her, but usually get stopped by the reality that we both like to eat. But that desire to express love extravagantly is not there because I owe it to her or because it is a requirement. It's there because I am so grateful for her.

But Jesus, the Lord of all, the King of Kings, has loved me even more sacrificially, more astoundingly than Laurie. When he had abundant reason to toss me on the trash heap, he not just loved me, he sacrificed to have me as his child, sacrificed to a degree that I will never comprehend. His love changes everything about my life. It gives me hope I would never have without him. It changes how I feel about myself and everyone else in the world. There is no way I will ever be able to express how grateful to him I am. Dumping even that much of an outrageously expensive perfume on him in one spectacularly wasteful display of gratitude doesn't even begin to compare with the outrageous love Jesus has poured out and continues to pour out on me. He died for me. How do you give thanks for that?

IMPLICATIONS

EXPRESSING LOVE TO JESUS STARTS WITH GRATITUDE

If you go away from this talk thinking that you have a duty to perform, then you've completely missed the point of Mary's act and of this sermon. Mary didn't try to figure out what she was required to do for Jesus after he raised her brother from the dead. She did not ask etiquette experts about the appropriate way to say "thank you" after someone miraculously resurrects a loved one. Where do you find that in the etiquette books? She did this because she was so grateful to Jesus for the unthinkable, incredible gift he gave to her family that she had to do something spectacular, something so out of the norm that it would blow Jesus away. She had to do something extravagant.

My freshman year in college a friend named Doug lived in the room next to mine in the dorm. Doug was a baseball player, a first baseman. He was a tall, lanky guy, a rather happy-go-lucky sort. However, Doug's baseball career was ended by a terrible accident. He was driving on the freeway one night when one of his tires blew. He safely pulled over to the shoulder on the right, but now he had to change

his flat tire in the dark on the side of the freeway. I never understood how this happened and he could never really explain it, but in the process of changing the tire somehow the car fell off the jack and he got his hand caught between the bumper and the top of the jack. When the car slammed down on his hand the weight of the car rammed the top of the jack through his hand, so his hand was impaled by it. He was caught there with the post of that jack through his hand and the weight of the car trapping it there. He said the pain was literally indescribable, that words like excruciating didn't even begin to capture the horror of it. I cringe when I think of it. He said he almost passed out the pain was so severe. He was able to use his free hand to rip his shirt off. He waved his shirt, hoping to catch the attention of someone driving by. Eventually another motorist did stop and render assistance. He survived the horrific experience but the damage to his hand put an end to his baseball playing days.

I think of that story occasionally at this time of year, because Jesus went through something far worse and it wasn't an accident. He deliberately chose to experience much worse than my college friend did. He had iron spikes driven through both hands and his feet, and then he was suspended from a crude cross to slowly die of asphyxiation, blood loss and shock. That was after he had already been horribly tortured! As awful as that was, it wasn't the worst of what Jesus experienced on the cross. The worst part was the spiritual component as the horror of all of the guilt of the human race was dumped on him. Have you ever been blamed for something that wasn't your fault? Think of the worst evils humans ever commit. The guilt and blame for all of that was pinned on Jesus who had never even had a single wrong thought. It felt to him like his perfect loving Father rejected him and turned his back on him. Jesus willingly submitted to that unimaginable atrocity in order to love us and save us.

Do you ever wonder why God chose such a cruel, awful way for Jesus to pay for our evil? I get the idea that death is the penalty for our rebellion against God, but couldn't Jesus just have been poisoned or come later in history and faced a firing squad? Couldn't it have been something quick and relatively painless? Why did he have to die such a gruesome death? God has not explicitly said why so, as with any time we ask why of God we cannot be too certain of our answer. I have my best guess as to why, and it involves two ideas.

The first is the gruesome brutality of crucifixion speaks to us about how desperately awful our disobedience to God is. We can easily think we're not so bad. There are people way worse than me. Sure, I admit I'm a sinner, but come on, I'm not all that bad, am I? I've never killed anyone or abused anyone. I've never

betrayed anyone. I've never been unfaithful to my wife. I've never even intentionally hurt anyone. But the horror of the cross says to me, "this is what it cost for Jesus to pay for your evil." In other words, this is what I deserve, and it's really, really bad.

My faults don't seem that terrible to me, especially compared with what some people are like. Honestly, I'm better than most I think. But then if I am honest I have to admit that I am obsessed with myself. Way too often I choose serving myself over serving God. That may not sound so bad, but that self-obsession is at the very core of evil, it is the choice that is the cause of all the pain and sorrow in the world. We can downplay it, make light of it, excuse it, but at its heart it is rebellion against God and what it deserves is what happened to Jesus at the cross. That is what I earn, and I earn on a daily basis. The ugliness and the brutality of Jesus' crucifixion reminds me of the horror of my own evil.

But second, the extreme nature of the cross is the measure of the extravagance of God's love for me. How much does God love us that he was willing to go to that length in order to gain forgiveness for us? What if there was a new tradition in our culture in which if a man claimed he truly loved a woman and wanted to marry her, that the way he had to prove his love was by having iron spikes driven through his hands? Do you suppose that might cause guys to think twice about this marriage thing? I suspect that if a guy went through with it his bride would be pretty confident that he really did love her. My version of that was enduring wedding planning and wearing a velvet tuxedo on a hot summer day, but maybe that's not quite the same.

Everything in our relationship with God starts with gratitude for what Jesus did for us on the cross. It's not just the horror that he went through there. It's that every day when we determine that today we are not going to be obsessed with ourselves, we are going to think only of serving God and loving other people, and then we find ourselves thinking about self, he still continues to pour out grace and love on us. Every time we are unfaithful to him, inconsistent in our love, he continues to welcome us into his presence and tell us that he is joyful because we are his children. He doesn't berate us, he doesn't reject us, he doesn't punish us for our failings, ever. Yes, he may discipline us, but the discipline is always in the context of love.

Our relationship with him is purely this: responding to his incomprehensible, unlimited, life-changing love with gratitude and love in return. We love him

because he first loved us. That is what Mary demonstrated in this incident, and it is the definition of our lives.

EXPRESSING LOVE TO JESUS IS THE METAPRIORITY

In Mark 14:9 Jesus said about this incident, “Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.” Here we are today two thousand years later and thousands of miles away and we are reading about Mary’s beautiful action. Jesus said doing what she did is good.

In Matthew 22:36 a Pharisee asked Jesus what the greatest command from the Law was. In verse 37 Jesus fired right back, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” If it is the greatest commandment it is the most important thing in life. It is not merely a priority, a thing we ought to do. I call it the metapriority, meaning the priority that is beyond all priorities. It is the priority that determines what our priorities should be and how we carry them out. Loving Jesus is the rule of your life. It is the starting point. It is the basis and the guide for everything else.

But how do you love Jesus? One expression that has been popular the past few years has been “love languages.” This got started by Gary Chapman’s best selling book *The Five Love Languages*. In it he said we each have a primary love language. He identified giving gifts, quality time, acts of service, words of affirmation, and physical touch or affection as the five languages. There is some truth in that proposition. I know I do have one of those that is probably most important to me. But I find that *all* of them matter to me. If Laurie left any one of them out I wouldn’t feel loved.

We cannot express love to Jesus through physical touch. But we can give him all the rest. We can give him gifts, words of praise, quality time and acts of service and devotion. We can give him money, we can praise him, we can spend time with him privately and corporately, and we can serve him every moment of every day. His love language is all of those. Do you realize that worshiping him here today is expressing love to him?

Mary’s example and Jesus’ approval of it says to us that we should think of how we can love Jesus extravagantly. In his book, *God’s Loving Word*, the late Ray Stedman wrote, “Love doesn’t count the cost of expressing itself. It simply delights in giving in order to show what is in the heart.” **Love is not a project or a duty to be accomplished, it is a passion that wants to be expressed!**

There have been numerous times I have seen this. I was reminded of one just last week when we had a church softball game. As I put my baseball glove in the car last Sunday morning I reflected on the fact that it is the best glove I have ever had. Almost every time I watch a major league baseball game on TV I will note that one of the players will have the exact same model that I have. The glove that I used when I played in high school and college was nowhere near the quality of this glove. I've had this now for a long time. You may be thinking, "Typical man. He has to go out and buy the best and most expensive toy for himself." You'd be wrong. I didn't buy this glove for myself. Early in our marriage when Laurie and I had almost nothing and had exactly zero cents to spare, Laurie bought this glove and gave it to me for my birthday. We had no money for something as trivial as a baseball glove. I was playing a little church league softball, not exactly an important thing. My old glove was not in good shape, but was still usable. Yet Laurie, knowing absolutely nothing about baseball gloves, went to a sporting goods store and asked, "what's the best baseball glove you have?" She bought that for me because she wanted me to know she loves me. It was extravagant, it was wasteful, and it was beautiful.

There was a song we used to sing in church that we haven't done in years, one I miss. It was never on the list of most popular worship songs in the country, most outside of our church had never heard it. But I loved that song. Its words, sung to God, were, "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."

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.'" We love ourselves lavishly, as evidenced by the homes we live in, the food we eat, the clothes we wear and the cars we drive. Do we love Jesus as lavishly? Wouldn't it be great if we astounded people with how outrageously we loved him? Wouldn't it be cool if people were appalled, scandalized, at our expressions of love for him? When was the last time you expressed love to him extravagantly, through some act of service, some praise, some gift? It's curious that we understand making lavish expressions of love to each other, but we often don't think of doing the same to the Person who loves us far more profoundly than anyone else ever has or ever will love us. I guarantee you this: there is great joy to be found in expressing our love to Jesus with enthusiasm.