

Sermon 3-21-2010
John 12:1-8

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It was an uncomfortable moment,

To say the least.

The intimacy,

The tenderness,

The extravagance of it.

Not to mention the taboos that were violated.

Everyone knows it is shameful for a woman to uncover her hair

To let it tumble down her back,

Revealing the secret of thick, shiny, jet-black cascades

So beautiful and sensuous

Out in the open, for all to see.

And the nard -

Not just any old smell.

Aside from being costly,

Distilled from an exotic plant and imported from India,

Nard meant something.

It had a sweet, yet heavy musky smell,

Reminiscent of the secret smells of lovers.

It was a perfume that was associated with sensuousness.

Nard is mentioned several times in the Biblical love poem

“The Song of Songs,”

And in the places where the scent of Nard is mentioned,

the love poem is undeniably, breathtakingly erotic.

The scent of nard is the scent of Uninhibited, passionate,

Extravagant love.

Love that throws caution to the wind,

Love that brings with it an adoration and devotion so complete,

So all-consuming,

That nothing else matters.

And that is precisely what we see in Mary’s act,

When she anoints Jesus’ feet with the nard oil.

A few drops of the strong ointment would have filled the room with the smell.

A couple of teaspoons would have scented the adjacent rooms as well.

A third of the bottle was enough

For that haunting, sweet and musky smell of nard

To scent the entire house and the courtyard.

The entire bottle must have released so much aroma,

Floating on the breeze from windows and doors and cracks in the wall,

That the whole block was scented with love.

**All the neighbors up and down the street
must have been wondering what was happening.**

But the act was strangely intimate.

It felt weird to be watching,

Not just for Judas,

but for everyone at the table,

it was awkward and embarrassing.

The slender hands holding the caloused feet,

Caressing the arches and the heels

The toes and the ankles,

Those fingers making circular motions on the skin,

The thumbs rubbing with longer strokes over muscle and sinew.

And then that black cascade of soft,

Beautiful hair,

The secret revealed,

The softness of hair on skin,

How close Mary had to lean in to Jesus's feet and legs

In order to reach with her hair,

Her face dangerously close to the skin of his shins and calves,

Her breath blowing the short, coarse hair of his legs

as she wiped the ointment with that black silk.

Mnnn ... Mnnnn ... Mnnn!

It's not something you do at the dinner table.

Whoever wrote the Gospel of John

Does his best to make the one who criticizes this woman out to be a bad guy,

The ultimate bad guy,

Judas Iscariot,

But I think that Judas just voiced what everyone was thinking.

Everyone was uncomfortable.

Everyone was astounded at this woman's brazen act of unbridled, unbounded, extravagant love,

The underlying passion and total self-giving,

The abandonment of inhibitions,

Everyone was embarrassed by this display.

No one knew what to make of it.

So finally,

One of them spoke up.

Judas voiced the questions in everyone's head:

Why is she doing this?

It's too much.

Too extravagant.

Too intimate.

Too passionate.

And it's too costly.

It's a waste.

Such displays of love and devotion have no practical value.

After the smell dissipates and the ointment wears off,

What then?

What has anyone gained?

What has been accomplished?

We have work to do!

Enough of this frivolous display of extravagance.

There is no room for such luxury.

It is a waste of money

For no purpose whatsoever.

Because we know the outcome of this story -

Because we know

**That later in this very same Gospel story,
Jesus would bend down to wash his disciples' feet,
And tell them to wash one another's feet
And the disciples' pride would get in the way.
Because we know that Judas would betray Jesus
That Jesus was about to die,
That the women would go to the tomb with spiced oils to anoint his
bloody, lifeless corpse,
And find no body upon which to pour the oils they had brought.
Because we hear the ominous foreshadowing in Jesus' words,
How this act of anointing points to a death by crucifixion,
Another act of extravagant, boundless, complete love
God's act of total self-giving
Which is mind-boggling,
beyond all of our limited understanding -
because we know all this,
we allow ourselves to be smug and complacent.
We place ourselves above these clueless disciples,
Who still just don't get it.
When Jesus says to the men,**

To those who criticize the woman with her jar of nard ointment,

And her long, loose black hair,

When Jesus says,

“Leave this woman alone!”

We nod our heads in agreement,

Perhaps smile a little.

But like the men who criticize her,

We, too, are easily hindered in our love,

By concern about function.

“What will it accomplish?” We ask,

“What will it do?”

“What purpose will it serve?”

“What use will it have?”

“What concrete, objective, documentable and measurable goal will it help us to reach?”

We are so concerned with utilitarianism,

With getting things “done.”

The disciple who points out

that the huge sum of money that Mary spent on this oil

Could have been used to help the poor

Well, he has a good point.

And as Jesus' disciples,

We ARE called to give to the poor,

To help the downtrodden and oppressed in tangible, material, concrete ways.

But one of the things Jesus also asks of us is pure,

Extravagant, Uninhibited, Passionate love.

Jesus calls us to a kind of devotion that cannot be measured,

That is not utilitarian and functional.

Love that cannot be quantified and documented in terms of objectives and goals,

That cannot be parsed out in countable units.

And such devotion entails adoration,

Intimacy,

And complete self-giving.

The kind of love that we are called to,

Is costly

And is not given out in parsimonious little drops and spoonfuls.

In Jesus' time,

Nard oil was so valuable,

That it was used for investment purposes,

Just as we might invest in bars of gold or platinum.

The bottle that Mary poured on Jesus' feet

Certainly represented about a year's wages for an average worker,

And it was, most likely,

Mary's entire life savings,

What she had invested in,

Like a 401-K,

To keep her secure in old age

And perhaps hand down to kin.

She poured it all out at Jesus' feet.

Costly, all-consuming, extravagant love

Love that does not understand the meaning of words

like "sensible"

and "reasonable."

This is the kind of love that we see demonstrated by Mary in this story,

Love that seems out of place

Over-the-top,

And somehow inappropriate.

Love that is boundless and uninhibited.

**Love that fills the house,
The courtyards,
The street
And the entire neighborhood
With its powerful, sweet, healing aroma,
The scent of intimacy, passion, and wild abandon.
Brazen Love that raises eyebrows and makes people say,
Mmmn ... mnnn ... mnnn.**

**Like Mary,
We are all called to get away from the utilitarian calculations
Of “What purpose will it serve?”
“What will it accomplish”
“What will it GET DONE?”
Instead, the fundamental question of faith,
Of discipleship,
Is “how can I love fully, completely, whole-ly.”
How can we fill the house and the street and the whole
neighborhood
With the aroma of love?**