

Fifth Sunday in Lent



Accept the Gift

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
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When I was eight years old my Grandmother took me downtown, not to shop so much as to be together. We went into a music store to say hi to a member of the church who worked there, Mr. Jeschke. On the way in we walked past bins of records, and a two-record package jumped into my hands. I looked at it. Wrapped together in cellophane were *Keyboard Giants of the Past* and *The Great Rachmaninoff*. \$5. I'd started piano lessons a few months earlier. Grandmother asked, "Would those records help you with your piano?" She bought them.

When we got home I put them on our record player. I was in heaven. Until my Dad came home. "Where did you get those records? How could you let her buy those records for you?" Dad and Mom had told us why our family was having hard times, and explained we'd get through it by working together. "You *know* she can't afford those records," Dad said. Then Grandmother said something very much like Jesus' words defending Mary, "It's all right, Johnny," she said to her son, my Dad. "I wanted to do this." I still have those two records. I brought one here today to show you.

It's impossible to imagine all the feelings in the room in today's scripture. Jesus is in the place that most feels like home to him. When in Jerusalem, he was a guest of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, who lived in the little town of Bethany, a short mile and a half walk from the City Walls of Jerusalem.

Martha was the one who asked Jesus to urge Mary to help her in the kitchen. You remember that story. Jesus invited Martha to join Mary and him in the conversation they were having with others, saying in effect, "There's time to clean up the kitchen later, come join us."

Months later, Jesus heard that Lazarus was very sick. He is almost paralyzed, staying where he was an extra day or two. When he arrived, scores of people are weeping and Martha and Mary said bluntly, "If you had been here our brother would not have died." Jesus walked toward Lazarus' tomb, overcome with grief. Then we read the shortest verse in the Bible, the one we use if we have to quote a scripture from memory, "Jesus wept." The people thronging around said, "See how he loved him." Jesus did love Lazarus and Martha and Mary. Raising Lazarus from the dead, along with all the other things he said and did, put him on the path to his own death. Mary, Martha and Lazarus must have known that this trip to Jerusalem was different. He was going to confront the political and religious powers that were plotting to take his life.

On this night the house had a sweet smell. Mary had purchased some of the best perfume. This is proof, in case we need it, that women in Bible times had resources, and the ability to do things like buy anointing oil. This story shows us Mary knew her tradition, her scriptures. She took the role of the prophets centuries before her who anointed new kings. She anointed Jesus king. Maybe she was thinking of the Isaiah Scripture for today, ¹⁹God says, 'I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?'

At dinner she anointed Jesus. She did not put the oil on his head, she anointed his feet. She sat at his feet many times before during life-changing conversations about how God was making room for all people at the Eternal Table. Scriptures on Holy Thursday tell us that on the night before his death Jesus himself, in an act of Servant Leadership, wiped the desert-dusty disciples' feet. Maybe he was reminding them of the way Mary anointed his feet. Mary did another amazing thing. Instead of using a rag to wipe his feet, she used her hair. By this simple action perhaps she was saying, "Whatever happens, I am with you no matter what you face."

The sweet, sweet Spirit of that moment filled the room.

When someone gives extravagantly, things change. Often, someone raises suspicions. Maybe Judas just can't deal with this highly emotional, mystical moment. He says to Jesus, "Tell her to sell this costly anointing oil and give the money to the poor." Jesus replies, "**Don't criticize Mary. I accept her gift. She knows what's at stake here. That's why she is so extravagant.**"

Jesus is then quoted as saying something that's been horribly distorted for centuries. Jesus does not mean "give up on the poor, they'll always be poor." Not at all. Jesus is saying, "**You can also do something for the poor anytime. Please do what you can for the poor. You won't always be able to share this poignant, emotional moment with me. Come, join me, too.**"

We struggle so hard to be generous enough to do all the amazing things we do as a church. God uses us to change lives every day. Yet we struggle financially as a congregation. Why? This story helps me understand why.

We have a hard time accepting gifts. It's a Nebraska-culture thing. Someone gives us a compliment. What do we do? We pass it off. Change the subject. Someone compliments someone else and we turn it into a joke or a put-down.

On Tuesday, I'll be in Texas at Lydia Patterson Institute. Texans on that board do things that turn my stomach: good ol' boy humor, braggy stuff. No offense to former Texans who now live here in Nebraska, I love you all. Glad you escaped! One thing I admire about Texans is the way they enjoy generosity. Extravagance. They do give. Some have no more than we yet give more generously. Happily.

We are beginning to receive reports from study groups about many things we must do as a congregation to build a bridge to the future. There'll be many opportunities this spring and summer to join the conversation. One group met Tuesday. We listened deeply to each other as we heard many positive words about ways people here are serving God and others through worship and music, community-building, spiritual growth and ministries with youth and children.

One person said, "I sometimes am too blunt but I think we are more takers than givers. We have inherited a wonderful facility thanks to the sacrifices of previous generations. We have run it into the ground. True, we've repaired it, but we haven't done what we needed to do to make it what it needs to be for future generations." Do you hear God saying "Behold I am doing a new thing"?

Will we choose to not be like Judas who discounted others' and God's extravagance?

Now please shift focus to yourself. How do you accept others' extravagant gifts? Can you claim and share the extravagant gift of a place at God's table, which God sets for us and for all people, even in the wilderness?

We aren't good at accepting gifts. I believe with all my heart that Jesus Christ is Divine and Human. Son of God and Son of Humanity. In this story Jesus shows us how to live fully human—fully divine: Accept the Gift! If you have a hard time accepting an extravagant gift, you are not alone. Let the way Jesus accepts Mary's extravagant gift show us that Divine nature is to give and accept. Generously. Extravagantly.

It's been years since I've played those two records my Grandmother gave me. Recently a family member gave me a 33 1/3 record player. After cleaning off the dust of the years with a simple record-washing system, one day, during Holy Week, I'll sit down and listen to these records again.

Everything about this story makes us think about who Jesus is, how God works, and how we do or do not Accept the Gift.

Everything about Holy Week makes us marvel at the way the Divine-Human one was willing to walk through even death in order to raise us, too, to new life.

"Generosity skewers prevailing complacency. Criticizing generosity is an easy way to dodge its power. Love has its reasons. Jesus is the gift of God. The world did not request him. Yet he acts entirely for its benefit. Lazarus was raised not on his sisters' time-table, but on Jesus. Similarly, Jesus will lay down his life not because he is asked to do so, but because he chooses to give himself." – William G. Carter

Prayers of the Faithful:

We thank you for showing us generosity is a two-way street, O Christ. Teach us to accept extravagant gifts of love from others, and especially from you.

Slight pause

For all who serve your people, O Christ, and especially those who serve you in places torn by violence or religious strife. We pray to you, God in your mercy, **Hear our Prayer**

For those who are hungry, in body or in Spirit, and for those who do are struggling to find a smooth path to return to your all-embracing arms, help us to live lives that will help them to find a home at your Table. God in your mercy, **Hear our Prayer**

For those who need to feel your healing power, including Margaret Fuller and Lah-Ree Turner, who are recovering from surgery, for all who struggle with the infirmities of this life, and for those who care for all who are ill. We pray to you, God in your mercy, **Hear our Prayer**

For those who have died, and for all anywhere who are ill or who grieve. God in your mercy, **Hear our Prayer**

Give us so deep a faith that in all times and in all places we may without fear commit those we love and ourselves to your constant love and care. We pray to you, God in your mercy, **Hear our Prayer.**

Prayer Concerns and Joys

We ask for your deep joy to give us courage as we commit to walk with our Lord Jesus Christ in the path that leads through struggle, And to accept the gift of new life, we pray. God in your mercy, **Hear our Prayer.**

Old Testament Scripture—Isaiah 43:16-21

Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters,
¹⁷who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior, they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick.

¹⁸Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.
¹⁹I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.
²⁰The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people,
²¹the people who I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

Epistle Scripture—Philippians 3:4b-14

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more:
⁵circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee;
⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

⁷Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things ,and I regard them as rubbish,
in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.

¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

¹²Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal;

but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do:

forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,

¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

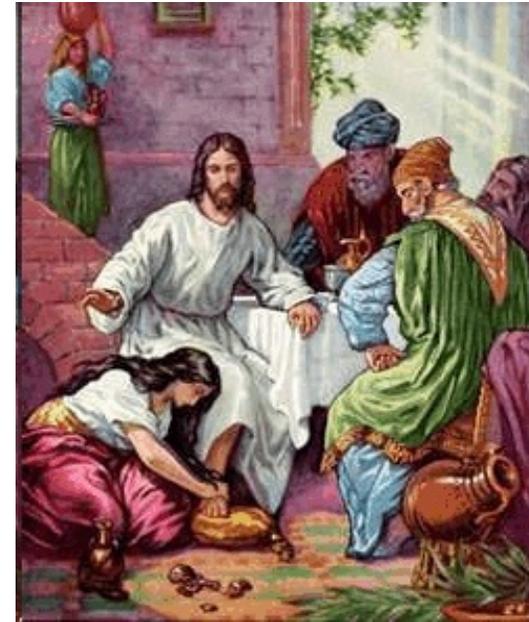
* Gospel —John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.

²There they gave a dinner for him.

Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.

³Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair.



The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said,

⁵“Why was this perfume not sold for 300 denarii and the money given to the poor?”

⁶(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.)

⁷Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.

⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”