

LENT FIVE, YEAR C, APRIL 3, 2022

Think for a moment about the best gift you have ever received. Who gave it to you? What made it special? Now was it special because it was extravagant for its monetary value or was it extravagant because of what it cost in terms of love? My daughter gave me a book this past Christmas that says Mom, I love you because and inside there are places for her to write the answer to a statement. An example is "I'd be lost without your and she wrote "random life advice". It's a truly heartfelt little book that touches my heart and soul deeply. Isn't it true when we think about the best gifts we received they are ones given from the heart. Why? Because the giver has considered who you are and what you need.

Mary wanted to show her thanks and love for Jesus. So, she took a pound of perfume worth 300 denarii, anointed Jesus feet, and wiped them with her hair. But three hundred denarii worth of ointment! Don't you think that was going too far? After all, it would take a whole year's salary to pay for it. Judas was right when he objected to how the money was spent. After all, didn't Jesus come to serve the poor? Wouldn't you expect that Jesus would agree with Judas and call a halt to Mary's extravagance? Or at least he should have said something about it. "Oh, you don't have to do this!" But no! He simply accepted the gift. In fact, he chastised Judas. "Leave her alone," he said to him. "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." Jesus is not saying that there is no need to look after the poor. He is not saying that there are not many in need. What he is saying is that if we were all as generous as Mary then the poor would be taken care of. Her extravagance is not the problem. It's our inability to share what we have that is the problem. There is a fine line between taking care of our own needs and helping others.

However, there is no question that this story, on one hand, is a metaphor for the anointing of Jesus for his death. As John's gospel progresses we see that the opposition to Jesus is increasing and the political and religious leaders of the day want to kill him. Jesus knew that he faced all the cruelty and horror of one that is labeled a blasphemer. In the midst of all these appalling circumstances, here is a heartwarming act of love shown by a woman who took a pound of costly perfume and anointed Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair. It was exactly what he needed. Mary, in her generosity, offered a gift from the heart, a gift that met Jesus' need. There was little doubt that he welcomed this act and considered it a pure act of devotion and love. When so many people were reaching out to Jesus in anger, she was reaching out to him in love. Here again, Mary's extravagance is a metaphor for God who yearns to anoint our lives with love and who expends everything to transform us through Grace. The pungent aroma of the perfume and the generosity of its outpouring is a sign of the vital presence of God's Grace.

Without a doubt it is an example of extravagant love in the midst of the harsh reality of the world we live in. It reminds us not only of God's extravagant love and grace but that in the midst of so much turmoil in the world we, following her example, must be the people of extravagant love. We have to be the ones who out of the blue do acts of extravagant love in the midst of the harsh reality of our world. The world needs it. We need to do it.

There is a wonderful story simply called "The Agnes Story". In it the author, Tony Compolo, a Baptist minister and professor tells the story of having arrived in Honolulu Hawaii from the East Coast. He found himself a victim of the extreme time difference and

was wide awake in the middle of the night craving something to eat. He wanted a coffee and donut and the only place that was open at 3:30am was an all night diner in what some would call a sketchy part of town. He felt somewhat uncomfortable but it was the only place he could find that was open at that time of the night. To add to his discomfort the door of the diner swung open and in marched eight or nine provocative and boisterous prostitutes. They were loud and crude and he felt completely out of place, but he heard one of them talk about it being her birthday the next day. When asked how she would celebrate she replied it wasn't a big deal – she never had a party growing up so it was just another day to her.

Something struck Tony in what she said and after they left he had a conversation with the man, Harry, behind the counter. He found out the girls came there every night at 3:30 for a bite to eat. Between them they decided that they would have a birthday party for the girl whose name he found out was Agnes.

At two-thirty the next morning Tony was back at the diner. He had picked up some crepe paper decorations at the store and had made a sign out of big pieces of cardboard that read, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" He decorated the diner from one end to the other and had that diner looking good.

The woman who did the cooking must have gotten the word out on the street, because by 3:15 it seemed that every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. It was wall-to-wall prostitutes and Tony!

At 3:30 on the dot, the door of the diner swung open and in came Agnes and her friend. They all screamed, "Happy Birthday!" He wrote, "Never have I seen a person so flabbergasted. . . so stunned. . . so shaken. Her mouth fell open. Her legs seemed to buckle a bit. Her friend grabbed her arm to steady her. As she was led to one of the stools along the counter we all sang "Happy Birthday" to her. As we came to the end of our singing, her eyes were filled with tears. Then, when the birthday cake with all the candles on it was carried out, she lost it and just openly cried".

Before cutting the cake, Agnes insisted on taking the cake home to her mother promising that she would be right back. When she left the whole place was silent and Tony ended up leading the whole group in prayer for Agnes. After that Harry said, "Hey! You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?" Tony replied that it was the kind of church that threw parties for prostitutes at three-thirty in the morning".

Harry thought about that for a moment, then he answered, "No you don't. There's no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. I'd join a church like that!"

Well, that's the kind of church Jesus came to create - a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at three-thirty in the morning! I don't know where we got the other one that's so prim and proper. But anybody who reads the New Testament will discover a Jesus who loved to party with prostitutes and with all kinds of left-out people. The publicans and sinners loved Him because He partied with them. The lepers of society found in Him someone who would eat and drink with them. And while the solemnly pious could not relate to what He was about, those lonely people who usually didn't get invited to parties took to Him with excitement.

The story of Mary and Agnes are the kinds of stories that tell of extravagant acts of love in the midst of the harsh reality of the world we live in. Oscar Wilde wrote, "Where there is no extravagance there is no love, and where there is no love there is no

understanding.” This is what we are called to be and do. When it comes to love there is no such thing as waste. Look at all the extravagant acts of love that have been extended to the people of Ukraine. Women in Poland gave their baby strollers to the moms crossing the border. A child sang the national anthem in the subway acting as a shelter. A man played his cello in the midst of a bombed out city. These are extravagant acts of love.

Imagine what impact you could have if even once a week you did just one intentional, personal, extravagant act of love. Just once a week, met a sister, or brother in their place of marginalization, poverty, pain and grief ... with nothing but ourselves and our love. What would happen if we took the time to soothe the suffering of the world one beloved child of God at a time? Let us be that church that follows Jesus – a church that is filled with People of Extravagant love who bring God’s love and grace into the harsh realities of the world. Amen.