

October 1
John 12:1-8
“Why Give?”
Michael Stanfield

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ² There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³ Mary 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. ⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred 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.) ⁷ Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸ You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

The words of God for the People of God. Let us pray. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, Our rock and our redeemer, Amen.

An affluent church member who collected rare wines dies. He bequeaths a fifty thousand dollar bottle of rare wine to the church. However, the will *stipulates* that upon receipt of the bottle it *has* to be opened and used for the next service of communion. What is your immediate reaction? If you can imagine this scenario, then you have an idea of what Mary's act of the anointing of Jesus was like.

The eleventh chapter of John's gospel concludes with outright plotting to arrest and kill Jesus; surprisingly the twelfth chapter – today's text – opens with a scene of quiet domesticity. The sisters Martha and Mary with their recently-revived brother Lazarus, host Jesus and his disciples for supper. Their home in Bethany was a familiar haven for Jesus. So despite the threats against his life, Jesus is depicted spending the day before his triumphal entry into Jerusalem with some of his closest friends.

As Jesus enters, Mary takes out a jar of nard and pours all of it onto Jesus in one extravagant act of love and worship. John goes into great detail about this act of anointing, including the comment about how the whole house is filled with the ointment's fragrance. So, suddenly the evening's events are moved beyond mere collegiality and congeniality. Nard was a rare and expensive perfume. And a whole jar of it cost three hundred denarii which was the equivalent of a year's wages.

Now, *that* is quite an act of welcome. So, I'd like for you to think about this for a moment: What do you normally do to at your house when you know you have special guests coming? What do you do to prepare? What do you do when they arrive?

Most of you sitting there go out of our way to make them feel welcome – to make them feel special. Well suppose you knew Jesus was coming – in the flesh. What would you want to do?

Mary's act of anointing is received by Jesus as a true act of passionate hospitality as well as an act of honoring who Mary knows Jesus to be – the suffering messiah. Yet it is interesting that this is *not* how it is viewed by others.

When Mary pours that expensive perfume over Jesus' head, Judas Iscariot is indignant; In Matthew and Mark, it is not only Judas but all the rest of the disciples as well. They are upset.

They are upset at what they consider a huge waste of money, knowing how difficult it is to accumulate savings. Judas is especially upset because he is used to palming a bit of the proceeds and it will mean less for him.

And they are all upset over the apparent outrageous impracticality and uselessness of their lives together, that there now seems to have been no greater purpose than to wander about teaching and healing a few when there were people suffering everywhere.

Judas among all the disciples saw this handwriting on the wall. The Pharisees were circling the wagons on Jesus and here they were wasting time and money – a year's worth of wages for a few moments of worship and honor when there was an avalanche of injustices being perpetrated by the Roman government leaving suffering people everywhere in its wake.

I'll bet any one of you who have been a part of a congregation for a number of years can identify a little with old Judas.

Because, I'll bet you have been a little anxious from time to time over the years about leadership that, in your opinion, is spending too much money on things that are extravagant: things like meals for dedication Sunday, things like nice furniture for the church, things like extra staff or programs for members.

“Why,” you may have asked, “Aren't we saving for times down the road when things might not be so rosy?” or “Why aren't we giving more to missions for the poor?”

Good questions; legitimate questions. Yet today's text turns such practical considerations on their ear. For in it, Jesus praises Mary for her act of extravagant devotion – her willingness to give her most precious possession for one moment of devoted worship to her Lord. Mary's faith is not in saving for the future. It is in her present reigning Lord. But is this really the responsible thing to do? Isn't it just plain reckless?

Yes and no. What was it Jesus said? Where your treasure is there will your heart be also?

What it really comes down to is this: where we put our money speaks about what we ultimately value. Mary valued the flesh and blood presence of Jesus which she, evidently better than anyone else, understood as more precious than anything. Life indeed is precious. Our deep human connections are incalculable. Mary got this. She understood *her* connection with Jesus as *the most* precious. She recognized the fragility of that connection given the grave threats from the Pharisees and she seized the moment, honoring it with all she had, savoring it, and inviting others in a profound way to share it. (pause)

When our two children were born, video recorders were all the rage. Consequently, we have tape upon tape of them from the time they were preschoolers all the way up until they were teens. Every time I look at those old videos, I cry. And I cry because that was without a doubt, one of the most precious, sacred times of my entire life. And I cry because that time is gone.

It makes me wonder: was I more like Mary in that precious fleeting time of deep connection or was I more like Judas?

Moving here to Missouri was a lot more difficult than Janet and I had ever anticipated. And I think it is related to our deep connection with that precious time. Both of our kids had already moved out of the house in TN. But it was a house in which they had lived for years. We could still feel their presence. In their rooms, we could even still smell them! It felt like they could come walking in the door at any moment.

Moving here was a dark collision with that fantasy: Our children visit us now only rarely as guests. Their sweet days of residency, that once seemed eternal, are gone forever. Oh we still have great relationships with them but that precious time of deep present incarnation in our lives is gone forever.

So these days, I don't regret a single penny or a single moment I ever spent on family time together. These days, I worry whether I could have been more like Mary, whether I could have been *more* extravagant in my love.

Face to face, soul to soul connections were what Jesus was all about. They, more than anything hold out the possibility of really transforming the world.

So when I hear money spent on missions for the poor pitted against money spent on sitting at the feet of Jesus together here in this place, it makes me sad. I am drawn to the lesson of Mary's encounter with Jesus. Yes, we need to open our hand to the poor. Yes we need to pledge our resources to issues of justice and peace. But hand-outs to the poor and those who are suffering injustices need not be at the expense or the detriment of the quality of our common life together. Jesus did not come that we might just barely survive as a species. No. He came with a much more extravagant plan in mind. Jesus came that we might have life and have it abundantly. And our text calls on us, each and every one of us, to be passionately extravagant where our common devotion to Christ is concerned.

Now, Trinity has never been extravagant in its spending by any means; yet my experience is that its discipleship most definitely follows in Mary's footsteps – in that Trinity has always placed a premium on recognizing the presence of Jesus in each other and nurturing that above everything else. It is, in fact, what attracted me here in the first place.

Yes, we should have an eye toward relieving suffering in every way we can. The best way to do that is by truly befriending the sufferer – by recognizing that we are indeed our brother's keeper, our sister's keeper – and that acts of hospitality and offers of friendship actually transmute the suffering into joy. That happens best in an inclusive community – a community that is authentically centered in Christ's love – a community like Trinity.

Over the last two years, the session has emphasized that what we do with our money, our treasure, is a spiritual act – a spiritual act of the highest order – and that Stewardship season is the time to ask, “How much of what God has given me do I feel called to return?” Further, the session has asked each and every one of us to consider the biblical tithe as a guide – that is to work toward giving away a tenth of our personal income each year to church and other worthy causes.

But it raises the question, “Why should I give a large portion of that to Trinity?”

Why would you want to give to Trinity over other places that more directly relieve suffering?

Why? – because you value what they stand for. Because Trinity stands for something precious.

In a world filled with leadership bent on dividing us into violent camps, Trinity is an oasis of persons on both sides of the theological and political spectrum who don’t just tolerate each other – but actually love each other.

And that love is made manifest in many ways.

First, it comes through the loudest in worship. I was called here because you are serious about the way you host the Lord every week in worship – both vertically and horizontally.

It is seen in the attention you place on the beauty of this space – on the ardor of your devotion to our Lord – those things that make the soul sing – great music, well planned, intentional liturgy that recognizes the movement of God among us, thoughtful preaching, clear, crisp sounds as evidenced by a new sound system – not to mention good fellowship and a genuine sense of loving community.

You pay me a very decent salary to be in charge of all of this. I can’t tell you what that means personally – you value what I have developed and what I bring. You also value Carol Virkler’s gifts and so have put them to better and further use as our Coordinator of Music. You bagged a whale in getting Steve Yates as our choir director. You just don’t know what it is to have such musical brilliance in such a small church. I have pastored much larger churches than Trinity and in none of them did they have people any more gifted and dedicated than Carol and Steve. Since Carol started as our music coordinator and Steve as our choral director, everyone has realized the sky could be the limit in terms of the kind of praising we might do – if only we had a couple more sopranos. So our worship and personnel committees are looking to provide scholarships to two students to attend and sing in the choir.

It will help Steve and Carol and the choir know that we appreciate their gifts and want to support their giftedness and their dedication, not to mention the fact that over the next year, I guarantee you that we are about to be moved in ways none of us have been in a long time.

Trinity’s inclusive love in a divided world is further seen in Lily Chan and Ann Bouchard, our office staff.

Lily is one of the purest souls I have ever met this side of heaven and I am telling you that Ann Bouchard has the gifts to be a fortune 500 administrative assistant. She has not only turned our bookkeeping around, she has become the recording clerk for our session and our stewardship committee, helped us rewrite our manual of operations, and is so good at anticipating what needs to be done and doing it, I am thinking of changing her name to Radar O'Reilly

Why give a large portion of your tithe to Trinity? Because Trinity is looking next year to expand its inclusive love by providing a better vehicle for befriending the stranger and the sufferer. Right now there are 18 people meeting once a week being trained by yours truly to become small group leaders so that eventually every person in this church will have a group of intimate friends in Christ and we will have a vessel for inviting others who visit for worship to do the same.

Why give to Trinity? Because of its continued dedication to children's ministry. We don't have many children but we have people willing to minister *to* children. Trinity sees this not as a deficit but as an opportunity – an opportunity to invite parents and children who are non-church members to special events here throughout the year that cater to children.

- Events like Advent Wreath-making, an Easter Egg hunt, and Vacation Bible School.

Why give to Trinity? Because Trinity attempts to share its inclusive love with a fellowship gathering every month – From Game night to the ice cream social – getting together to enjoy each other is valued.

And, of course, Trinity has always expanded this love by being Mission-minded – to relieving suffering in the name of Christ in the world. For its size, Trinity seeks to give more of its pledged income to causes like homelessness, lack of food, ameliorating abuse of every kind, and aid to children, than practically any other congregation in the Presbyterian Church USA.

In fact, Trinity will be striving to give more *to* our denomination per capita in 2018 than any other church in the synod and maybe any other church in the denomination.

Trinity's session understands that our little congregation is not the Church (with a capital "C"); but that we are part of the greater church and we recognize that what we have here is special – like hosting Jesus at Mary's house just before his death. We want that for others and because your session knows that together we have the resources, they invite you to pledge a large portion of your charitable giving – your work toward the giving of a tithe – to Trinity in 2018 to make that happen.

A letter and a pledge card will be mailed to you in the coming days and then on October 29, Reformation Sunday, we will celebrate the dedication of our 2018 pledges to God at the end of the service. God is doing amazing things here and I guarantee you that, as with Mary, extravagant giving to Trinity is never a waste.

Let us pray: Gracious and most merciful God, never let us lose sight of your precious presence among us. Give us the same generosity that was Mary's whose extravagant love still echoes down through the millennia. Now bless this portion of what you have given us as we return it

back to you for the purpose of bringing your love more fully into the world. In Christ's name we pray, Amen