

## **Holy Extravagance**

**Sermon by Lori Erickson**

**New Song Church, April 6, 2025**

In the Gospel reading for today, the time of Jesus' death is drawing near. He is in Bethany, visiting his friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus, whom he has raised from the dead. Jesus knows, and we know, that the shadow of the cross already stretches across the scene.

Then Mary comes in with a jar of perfume so expensive that it could've paid someone's entire salary for a year. But without hesitation, she pours the precious oil out on Jesus' feet—not just a dab, not just a symbolic drop—but all of it. She doesn't calculate the cost, she doesn't ask if it's appropriate, she doesn't explain herself. She just **loves**—awkwardly, whole-heartedly, extravagantly. She anoints his feet, and then, in a gesture that is shocking in its intimacy and unexpectedness, she wipes them with her hair.

And as she does so, the entire house is filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

Have you ever done anything extravagant out of love? Maybe you made a ridiculous amount of food for a friend who's grieving, enough to fill much of a freezer, just because you didn't know how else to show your sorrow and support. Or maybe you flew across the country to surprise a sibling on her decade birthday, even though you were nearly broke and could only stay a couple of nights. Or here's one I just did: I spent a couple of months knitting an elaborate baby sweater out of expensive yarn for a new grandbaby who will likely wear it just a few times. Things like this don't make sense, except when viewed through the lens of love.

I think when we love extravagantly in these ways, something lingers, a kind of invisible grace. That's one way of interpreting the symbolism of the smell of the perfume lingering in the

house at Bethany. This kind of love reflects the nature of God—lavish, unmeasured, poured out without counting the cost. And that kind of devotion doesn't vanish with the moment—it seeps into the fabric of our lives. It stays with us and influences us.

Now back to the Gospel story, that marvelous, tightly packed drama that is so short and yet so full of meaning. Now we hear the voice of Judas, who cloaks his complaint in self-righteousness. “Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor?” he asks. He sounds reasonable, even virtuous, on the surface. But as the Gospel writer tells us, his concern isn't genuine. Judas is a thief who cares more about money than mercy—and perhaps, at a deeper level, he can't bear the sight of Mary's vulnerable, open-hearted love. It exposes something in him. Her lavish devotion makes his own emptiness all the more painful.

That's the uncomfortable power of genuine love—it reveals things. It brings hidden parts of ourselves to light. And so we're left not just with Judas's voice, but with a mirror held up to our own hearts.

And while there's a little bit of generous Mary in all of us, there's also some of the self-righteous Judas. It's the voice in our head that critiques, that judges, that makes snide comments to pull someone else down. It's the part of us that wants to **appear** good without actually **being** good.

Then Jesus rebukes Judas, telling him to leave Mary alone. And next he says something even more startling: “You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.” That line has been misused for centuries—as if Jesus were dismissing the needs of the poor. But that's not what he's doing. He's not making a general statement about priorities, but instead naming the holiness of this particular moment. He's saying: *Pay attention. Something sacred is happening right now.*

Jesus is emphasizing the urgency of presence—the call to notice what is unfolding before us, to honor the fleeting beauty of what will not come again. That’s what it means to hold someone’s hand as they are dying or grieving. Yes, in a practical sense, there may be more “productive” things to do. But what could possibly matter more than showing up, fully, when love is most needed?

Jesus is saying: don’t miss the sacred when it shows up. Don’t get so caught up in your plans to do good that you fail to recognize the holiness right in front of you—especially when it comes in unexpected, messy, or awkward forms.

Because Mary sees what the others miss or at least refuse to acknowledge—Jesus is heading towards his death. While the disciples argue about cost and efficiency, she sees the moment for what it is: fleeting, precious, and sacred.

In her extravagant action, Mary does three things:

- **She anoints a king**, as prophets once anointed rulers of Israel.
- **She prepares a body**, as one might prepare a loved one for burial.
- **And she embodies discipleship**, not with words, but with presence and costly devotion.

And that scent—can you imagine it? It would have clung to Jesus’ skin, to his clothing, and maybe it was still faintly there as he carried the cross days later. Mary’s love went with him, accompanying him to the door of death itself.

Because that’s what extravagant love does. It goes all the way, abiding with us no matter what happens.

Last week, we heard the story of the Prodigal Son—a parable that’s also soaked in the scandal of grace. A son who squandered everything is welcomed home with a robe, a ring, and a

feast. The father doesn't wait for an apology; he runs to meet him, arms open wide. The older brother, like Judas in today's Gospel, is practical, resentful. He wants fairness, not abundance.

But love—real love—is never just fair. It's *more* than fair. It's wasteful by the world's standards.

This week, the story is of Mary at Jesus' feet. And once again, we see love that doesn't add up: a bottle of perfume worth a year's wages, spilled out in a single act of devotion. And again, there's someone nearby saying, "*What a waste.*" But Jesus, like the father in last week's parable, affirms the gift. Because love that looks wasteful to some is often the truest offering of all.

In both stories, the person who *loves the most* is the one who understands grace. The prodigal son experiences it. Mary offers it. And Jesus receives it, just as he has offered it to others again and again.

So how do we recognize these moments—these invitations to pour ourselves out like Mary did? They don't arrive with the sound of trumpets or a neon sign flashing "here's a chance to do God's will." Instead they usually show up quietly, disguised as interruptions. A phone call you weren't expecting. A friend who doesn't ask for help but clearly needs it. A moment when you could speak with kindness, or at least hold back the sharp retort.

Extravagant love doesn't feel convenient. It often feels costly—of our time, our energy, our pride.

But here's the thing: when the Spirit nudges, it's usually in these small heart tugs, those moments that catch your breath a little. When someone's face lingers in your mind. When you hear a quiet voice saying, "*You could do more.*" Or maybe, "*Don't hold back.*"

Mary didn't know all that was ahead for Jesus, but she knew that *this moment mattered*. And she acted.

So our invitation is to stay awake. To listen. To notice. And to ask **What does love require of me here and now?** In Lent, we often talk about **giving up**—but Mary shows us what it looks like to **give away**, not from scarcity but from fullness.

I think Mary's act of love is especially important to remember right now. With so much grief and injustice in the world—with the noise of the news cycle, the weight of the headlines—it's easy to feel overwhelmed, even hopeless. But this story reminds us that sacred moments still break through. Love still shows up. And our call, our duty, is to stay present to it, to notice the beauty that hasn't left us, and to keep choosing compassion, even when the world feels harsh and uncertain.

As for me, I keep coming back to the smell of the perfume filling the house. I love that part of the story, especially. Because, goodness knows, some days I'm the person with the bottle of perfume in my hands, and some days, I'm just standing there inhaling the blessing of someone else's offering, hoping it will carry me through.

So as we go into our time of silence, I invite you to bring to mind a moment in your own life when someone showed you extravagant or unexpected love. It might have been a word, a gesture, a presence. Sit with that memory for a moment. Let it fill the space around you like perfume.

And then ask yourself: Where is God calling *you* to love like that? And what would it mean for us to pour out what we have—our time, our kindness, our forgiveness—not because it's deserved, or practical, but because in pouring ourselves out, we mirror the very heart of God?