

Sermon 3-21-10

Extravagant Giver

John 12:1-8

Last Saturday, Jeff and I went to a sub-district meeting in Laramie and learned about growing churches. We learned a lot about the five practices of faithful congregations: radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional faith development, risk-taking mission and service, and extravagant generosity. So, today I dared to pick one issue out of the five to challenge you. Will you feel taken aback by my challenge to you on this issue?

The extravagant giver is God who gave his only Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, for the sake of all of us. That is the story of salvation. Responding to this extravagant act of God and the Jesus' voluntary act of taking the cross, Paul said, "We should no longer live for ourselves, but for him who died for us."

Today's scripture reading, John 12:1-8, describes the story of Mary.

Jesus is on his way to the cross. It is six days before Passover. He knows the time of the Crucifixion is coming soon. He stops in Bethany to visit his beloved friends, the family of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Just a few days earlier, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, and now they all sit down to have dinner together. Mary does a beautiful but extravagant thing for Jesus: She kneels before him and anoints his feet, generously pouring out costly perfumed oil on them. And then, she wipes his feet dry with her hair.

Oil was used for sacrifice, consecration and healing. In particular, when oil was used for sacrifice, it was believed that miracles occurred. Why did she do that? We may guess that it was an act of gratitude in which she was thanking Jesus for raising her brother, Lazarus, from the dead. On the other hand, it was an act of consecration in which she was baptizing the feet of Jesus to encourage him to go into the Holy City and do what had to be done. Jesus thought that it was an act of preparation in which she was anointing Jesus' body for the death that was to come in Jerusalem a few days later.

But, the story doesn't end there. After doing this beautiful thing, Mary is criticized and ridiculed and rebuked harshly by the disciple, Judas, because Judas disagrees with what she has done. "What a waste!" he complains. How foolish! How stupid! Look what we could have done with all the money we could have gotten from selling that perfumed oil. Think of how many poor people we could have fed!

The story of Jesus anointed at Bethany was recorded in Matthew 26:6-13 and also in Mark 14:3-9. The reporter of this story made a footnote in verse 6: "He (Judas) did not say this because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it."

It wasn't even his oil. But, the idea sounded good, and he expected Jesus to praise him for his wisdom and prudence.

According to the Mark's report (Mark 14:6), Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Why are you bothering her?" "She has done a beautiful thing for me. I tell you, truly, wherever the Gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."

In this story of Jesus anointed at Bethany, we see the differences between Judas and Jesus in the interpretation of the action of Mary.

First, Jesus saw her act as a beautiful thing done for him, while Judas was misunderstanding it as a stupid act of extravagance.

About twenty some years ago, the church I served grew very fast at that time. The worship attendance was about one hundred plus some, so the members were excited. Everybody was uplifted. When the day of the anniversary of the founding of the church arrived in October, a meeting was held among the leadership in the church. At the meeting we discussed the issue of how we would celebrate the church anniversary Sunday. One of the members at that meeting had come to the United State recently and just scraped by, living in a small apartment. He volunteered to order a special cake from a good bakery for the occasion. It would cost him one hundred dollars. Another member at the meeting complained that the suggestion to order a cake was not good idea, and that we should block the idea. This was extravagant and wasting money. And, if they wanted to order a cake, they should order it through King Sooper's at a cheaper price.

I suggested that we accept their gift of the cake. What they wanted to do wouldn't bother anyone. That family thought of the church as the body of Christ, and wanted anything to offer to God to be of the best quality. The one who complained was richer than this new comer family. But, those who are richer haven't thought about extravagant giving. The richer man was a smart man, and a well educated, rich man. But, he didn't do much to contribute to the church because he thought tithing is also extravagant generosity.

I learned through my lifetime of ministry that there is mystery in the life of believers. For instance, I have observed that there is no relationship between parents' intelligence and their children's success. But, I have often observed a relationship between parents' devotion to God and their children's success.

I recently heard news about the family who were the new-comers who had offered the extravagant cake for the church anniversary. The family had two young boys at that time. Their two sons have grown up well, one became a medical doctor and the other attended a prestigious college. But, I've never heard of any successful stories of the children of the rich man who had complained about the extravagant cake. God remembers who use their gifts for God, extravagantly.

Second, worship is more important than human service.

In our scripture reading, we recall that Judas disagrees with what Mary has done. "What a waste!" he complains. How foolish! How stupid! Look what we could have done with all

the money we could have gotten from selling that perfumed oil. Think of how many poor people we could have fed! This sounds good. It sounds wise, it sounds like a great idea. But, Jesus' response was different. "You will always have the poor with you, but I will not be with you always." The problem is priority.

Prioritizing is very important in our life. "Do first thing first" is the wisdom and courage.

Imagine that if you put on your outer garment first and slip on your under wear on top of that how funny it is! Jesus reminds us, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, then God will provide you the rest that you will need." The meaningful life begins with worship. Worship cannot be postponed. Worship is for today.

Jesse L. Jackson once said, "If a person has a goal for living into which one can put everything he or she has, that person is blessed." That is true. But, the problem is that while many people are waiting for the chance to put everything they have into this kind of significant life, most never find the meaningful life. Mary uses her expensive perfume, nard oil, for the Lord and on time.

Lastly, let us praise rather than criticize when we meet somebody who uses his or her gifts extravagantly for God, and learn from them. Jesus, our Lord, commends their extravagant giving. "She has done a beautiful thing to me. I tell you, truly, wherever the Gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her," Jesus said of Mary. But, Judas disgraced and criticized her actions.

Do you know that Judas had personal problems? The problems were rooted in jealousy about Mary because he couldn't do what she did, and Judas was disgruntled against Jesus who didn't support his idea and suspected his intention.

There is the first murder case in the Bible. Cain, the elder son of Adam killed his younger brother, Abel, because of jealousy. Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock and offered them to God, while Cain offered some of fruits of the soil. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So, Cain was very angry and his face was downcast. So, Cain killed his brother because of jealousy. That was the seed of misfortune for human beings.

It is interesting that after Judas found himself surprised and rebuked by Jesus' saying, "Leave her alone. Why are you bothering her? ... She has done beautiful thing to me," Judas went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. (Mark 14:10) Judas mind radically changed from loving to hating Jesus.

There is a famous story written by Oscar Wilde about the devil who came upon a group of people tormenting a holy man. They are trying to break his spirit, but to no avail. He resists every temptation with poise and serenity. They tempt him with wine, food, beautiful women, money, and worldly pleasures, but the holy man is steadfast, unbending in his commitment.

Finally, after watching for a while, the devil says to the tempters, "Your methods are too crude, too obvious; permit me." Then, the devil walks over and whispers to the holy man, "Have you heard the news? Your brother has just been made bishop of Alexandria!" Immediately, a malignant scowl of jealousy clouds the formerly serene face of the holy man!

To live is to love. Without loving, life is meaningless. To love is to give. Without giving, love is emptiness. As much as you love, you give; and as much as you love, you live.

Worship is the first priority in our life. Through worship we can get the power to live, to love, to give and to change. Jesus said, "But the time is coming, and is already here, when the real worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth." Let us worship the Lord extravagantly.