

The Fragrance of Extravagant Love Lent 5 C

"Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?'" John 12: 4, 5.

Do you know that short story by O. Henry and entitled, "The Gift of the Magi?" It's about a young couple, Della and Jim, who were very poor but very much in love. Each had one unique possession. Della's hair was her glory. When she let it down it almost served as a robe. Jim had a gold watch which had come to him from his father and was his pride. It was the day before Christmas, and Della had exactly one dollar and eighty-seven cents to buy Jim a present. She went out and sold her hair for twenty dollars; and with the proceeds bought a platinum fob (ornate watch chain) for Jim's pocket watch. When Jim came home at night and saw Della's shorn head, he stopped as if stupefied. It wasn't that he didn't like it or loved her less; for she was lovelier than ever. No. Slowly he handed her his gift; it was a set of expensive tortoise-shell combs with jewelled edges for her hair – and he had sold his gold watch to buy them.

Love is like that, I think. It is extravagant. It is always giving, even of that which is most precious to us, if it will in some way honour the one we love.

Bass Mitchell, the minister from whom I got the idea for this sermon, writes:

"I remember one Christmas. It had been a tough year for my father. He was a self-employed carpenter. I don't know all the facts, but from getting just a bit of the whispers between Mom and Dad I knew that there was not much money for Christmas, especially for getting presents for five children. And all they had heard from me most of that year was that I wanted an English Racer (a really expensive bike). But I knew that there was no way I would get it. So imagine my surprise when Christmas morning came and there by the Christmas tree was that black, shiny new English Racer! Later I found out my dad had taken on another job just to pay for Christmas."

He continues:

"I thought about him this week when I came across an almost new bottle of Old Spice After Shave. I splashed a little on and was suddenly transported back to a two story house in Bridgeton, to Sunday mornings when I would go into the bath room after Dad had shaved. There, lingering in the air, was the scent of Old Spice ... and to this very day each time I get a whiff of it, I think of not some after shave but of him, of all the things he did for me, of all the sacrifices a father and mother make for their children which only now I am beginning to realize. No, what comes to me is not the scent of cologne but the fragrance of an extravagant love."

That's brilliant isn't it? I know just what he means – creosote or tar, my granddad; lavender water my grandma; Brylcreme for uncle Charlie; two-stroke fuel Grampy Alec; Estee Lauder's Blue Grass Sister Jones. Fragrances of extravagant love, for they all made their contributions to my life without thought for themselves.

Love, real love, gives off an odour. You can smell it. In fact it is strangely tangible in all kinds of ways. People in love give off something that we all recognize. And that makes unrequited love all the harder to cope with. How many children haven't understood how much they are loved? How many relationships of one kind or another are blighted by love unrecognized or love unreturned? Misunderstood, misdirected, or mistaken love can have such shattering consequences. To a stranger looking on these things are painful to see. No wonder countless stories have been written about this very thing. Love is extravagant. It gives and gives of itself until there is nothing more to give, and then grieves that it has nothing more to bestow. Such love has its own aroma, its own powerful fragrance that time cannot dissipate. And we all know it.

And I hope you caught a whiff of that extravagant love in this story of this incident in the home of Lazarus; beloved Lazarus whom Jesus had raised from the dead. There's an odour here. A little detail will enhance the smell:

The same incident I think as that recounted rather differently in Matthew and Mark's gospels. John puts it earlier than either of them, and then tells

us that after it the chief priests “planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.” (John 12.10-11). So this outpouring of devotion provokes a strong reaction in the religious authorities – a reaction strong enough to contrive not just the murder of Jesus, but also Lazarus. Not a sweet fragrance – but a stench, the stench of jealousy, the stench of death. Do you remember they feared to open the tomb of Lazarus for because of the stench of death? Now in Lazarus’ home the smell is the delight of perfume, the richness of love. But that stink that signifies corruption and decay tries to suffocate it. And, of course, that isn’t just about those e powerful people who have had their noses put out of joint by Jesus’ words and deeds; something is festering amongst his friends as well.

Matthew and Mark tell us that the anointing with perfume is what triggers Judas to betray Jesus. John alone identifies and singles out Judas as the person who criticised the incident, whereas both Matthew and Mark say that a number of those present, including some disciples, joined the chorus of disapproval. So Judas was not alone in his disapproval, but it’s Judas who is so jealous and offended that he decides to betray Jesus.

In life jealousies and criticism are never far away, and here we have Judas and some others criticising. Were they criticising Mary for this overtly generous and seemingly wasteful expression of love, or were they criticising Jesus himself for accepting it? If it was the trigger for the betrayal, it was certainly a criticism of Jesus. No sweet fragrance but essence of bitterness, the stink of criticism.

How easily our thoughts turn from God accepting our contribution, to God not accepting someone else's contribution. Criticism, condemnation, accusation, comes so readily to us. It is a theme which goes from one end of the Bible to the other, beginning with Cain and his brother Abel. Judas betrays Jesus because Jesus accepted Mary's offering rather than his contribution. How powerful are the emotions invoked. And we cannot point to Judas alone – as if only he had some character defect which made him different from the rest of humanity. Matthew and Mark agree that others of the disciples agreed with Judas.

Feminist commentators draw our attention to the apparently overtly sexual nature of this action of Mary, and suggest that it was this aspect that caused such outrage amongst the male disciples. There is nothing quite like sex to raise peoples ire. Even if the action was not intended by Mary, or interpreted by Jesus as sexual, it is highly likely that the male disciples jumped to different conclusions. That alerts us to the fact that jealousies determine much of what we do or don't do. These are things deep within us – not things that are carefully and rationally thought through, but things that bubble up from the depths – love and jealousy are both there.

God accepts our offerings and the offerings of all. The only offering God cannot accept is that which comes with strings attached – that offering that says I only make it if someone else’s is rejected. ‘I’ve got it right so she must have got it wrong.’ We need to hear this and take it to heart. Have you noticed the point is even made in the Lord's Prayer? The disciples ask for the ‘right’ way to pray – so that they can be in a right relationship with God, by implication the relationship that others aren’t in. But Jesus calls them to a right relationship with their neighbour as pre-eminent – ‘forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.’

The story of the anointing tells us that God accepts our offerings, no matter who we are, or how they are expressed. The story of the anointing tells us that all of us are far less ready to allow other's offerings to God to be acceptable. God welcomes sinners – all sinners. And the real question is not whether we can turn the heart of God – but whether we will accept ‘all who come.’ It is we who are calculating, jealous, misery with our love; not God. The reality is that God is far more merciful than any of us and it is a blasphemy to suggest otherwise.

The action of Mary who "took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair" is an act of pure devotion – and it has no theological or moral significance to anyone else – and what others might give or choose not to give to God or others. It doesn't criticise others who might give to the poor – for giving to the poor is equally as acceptable to God as was Mary's actions. The fragrance of extravagant love isn’t something to rouse our jealousy – it simply is, and we should delight in it.

It is criticism of others which is shamed in this story. The attitude which says that others have to live up to our expectations cuts no ice with God. And so the good news is that we don't have to live up to expectations. I have enough trouble living up to my own expectations, let alone anyone else's. God could inflict the longest set of expectations of all, but he doesn't he just loves us, extravagantly!

Take a breath, sisters and brothers in Christ. Take a breath. Can't you, even now, catch on the breeze the sweet fragrance of such an extravagant love?