

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Janine Wilson, associate minister of the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 21, 2010, the fifth week of Lent, offered to the glory of God and dedicated to my sister, Linda Diane, who loves and serves the Lord faithfully, with deep gladness.*

## **“An Exciting Faith Finds Gratitude in Serving”**

**John 12:1-8**

**(Part VI of VIII in the sermon series  
“An Exciting Faith”)**

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May the words of my mouth and meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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When you go out to dinner, I mean a really fancy dinner and there are leftovers, what goes through your mind? Is there ever a debate in your brain? Do you ever ask for a take-home box, or is that the last thing you would ever do?

Have you looked down at the plate and suddenly heard a voice in your head that sounded like Miss Manners teaching your second-grade class to *stop and think your decision through ever so carefully*? “Let’s see,” you wonder to yourself in response, “is it OK to ask the waiter for a take home box in a place like this? What will the couple sitting at the next table think if they see me scraping food into a Styrofoam box?”

Or could the voice sound instead like your mother’s . . . is it possible that tonight, your eyes *were* bigger than your stomach?

After all these years she could she still be right – yes, it would be awful to leave that much food uneaten on your plate while children around the world are starving.

Does a harsh clinical voice of reason pop up unexpectedly – the one that sounds like your accountant on April 15 asking you what on earth you are thinking? How could you hesitate even for a second – of course you are going to bring home the left-over's – you paid full price for the meal didn't you!

Or maybe, maybe it is an inner sensation, more like a tender sound resonating inside you, not so much a thought as an elusive wondering – would it be possible to recapture some of this special night again? Maybe tomorrow you could look past the microwave and the bright morning sun and recover at least a little bit of this night's romance and ambiance?

The truth is, manners, guilt, frugality and even nostalgia, CANNOT tell us how to react when we feel the great sweep of gratitude that comes at the high point of a celebration. Take for instance Mary's actions at the dinner party in Bethany. How would we try to explain them? What are we to think of what she did? Would we dare do such a thing our self? You remember Bethany don't you?

It's that little get-a-way town on the way to Jerusalem-- the one that's just over to the east. It's not hard to imagine the shadows that lingered after dinner that night in Bethany. The people were filled with gratitude—their brother, friend and neighbor Lazarus was alive again. And the man who brought him back was there at the dinner party with them. What should they do? How could they make this moment last? What to do to make it special, memorable?

The weightiness they felt was surely amplified by the location itself. Resting in the light of the Passover's full moon, just six days before the festival, was dangerous. Jesus' raising of Lazarus had polarized people. Many believed Jesus to be a true prophet now, maybe even the Messiah. Others wished to see him killed, and if

Lazarus was killed along with him, so much the better – eliminate the evidence. Other folks just wanted to see Lazarus under the moon. What did he look like now, just-returned-from-the-dead? What did his closest friends think of it all? They were there with him: Lazarus, Jesus, Judas and all the rest, reclining around the table on the outskirts of the great holy city of Jerusalem, as if they were just over in Worthington or Westerville.

But Bethany is not just Worthington or Westerville; it is a remarkable place! (Not that our neighboring towns are not wonderful!) Bethany is where Lazarus lived, died, was laid out for eternal rest – then all in God’s good time, was brought back to life by his friend Jesus. Bethany is where Mary and Martha served Jesus many a great meal and received lessons from him on how to learn when the Christ is in your midst. Bethany is the place where Jesus sent his disciples to retrieve a colt to ride upon on when he returned in triumph to Jerusalem surrounded by hosannas and blessings. Bethany is the place Jesus went when his feet were tired and his heart was full. It’s the place where beginnings and endings reversed themselves.

Now everyone wondered, what would happen in that remarkable town on this special night. The Bethany gathering proved to be more than just a mannerly affair where social graces would rule the evening. It became the place and time where the fragrant nard would mark it forever.

John weaves an intricate tale for us. On one hand, the “anointing of Jesus” by Mary was a demonstration of what he had been telling the disciples for quite some time, namely that he was soon to die. The oil had been bought by Mary for the day of Jesus’ death. (John 12:7) Her action of washing Jesus’ feet with her hair and the perfume prefigured at the beginning of the week what Jesus would do for his disciples at the end of the week. Only days from now Jesus would wash their feet and give his own demonstration of the ultimate act of servanthood, humility and gratitude. But perhaps the most startling thing about Mary’s act is the intimacy of it.

She modeled for the others that deep gratitude leads to service; and service is far different than mere alms giving. Service in the name of Christ is a close-up and personal act. All these centuries later we can find ourselves still a little shocked, or at least awkward, observing Mary's unrestrained love for Jesus. We are startled chiefly, I think, because we find it hard to personally imagine ourselves doing anything similar. What she does isn't "appropriate." Not only that, on the surface, it does seem sort of wasteful and a part of us wants to agree with Judas' logic – think how many of the poor could have been helped with the same amount of money Mary spent on that pound of perfume she then poured out all over the patio floor around Jesus' feet. It is disquieting to think of a grown woman doing such a thing. It still stirs us up centuries later. But the truth is that extravagant love in one place does not negate our ongoing responsibility in other places.

Loving the Lord, however strained or unrestrained, still calls for us to follow through with ministries of care and compassion. Mary's actions do not demonstrate an either/or mentality. Daily discipleship does not eliminate sacrificial love. Instead, love extended to God challenges us to extend love to others in even greater proportion. It calls for us to give our heart, soul and mind.

John's story is more than just a symbolic story foreshadowing Jesus' death. It is more than merely a way of leading us into the later scene where Jesus washes the disciples' feet. This story exhorts us to lavish our gratitude and love upon God and all of God's children. It prompts us to think about whom *we* are to anoint and to wonder how *we* know when it's the right time to let go of our own restraints. Where is the right place to risk looking foolish; to risk going beyond the ordinary?

The prophets, old and new, have the answer. They tell us to stop fussing about the past and quit pandering to the present. They make it plain that we are to "listen up and trust God," for God is forever coming up with amazing ways for us to celebrate without limits and to give without holding back.

The Apostle Paul also reminds us today to forget “what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead,” to “press on toward the goal for the prize of the call of God.” (Phil 3:13-14) And Isaiah coaches us to hear God call out these words to us: “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:19)

So let your faith excite you! Let your gratitude overflow in acts of unrestrained love like Mary did! Look for the places where the Lord is in our midst. You will find them wherever God is busy doing a new thing, so throw your caution to the wind! Fly the March kite of joy here in the midst of the winds of change. Do you worry about what the neighbors think when you send your kite aloft? No, so don't waste time feeling bad about yesterday. Don't hold your petty purse of pennies, nickels and dimes close to your chest like Judas did. Now is the time for us to trust our God, because there are great things for us to do today!

Perhaps now is the time for us to join others and help usher in the new “God is still speaking” campaign that will begin mid-April. Maybe it's time for us to pitch in and help build a Habitat house; or take part in the beginning of the new church development with our Association. Maybe God's calling us to participate in digging the wells, dreaming up dreams and transforming the vacant lot that is waiting for us in the hope of God. Maybe it's time for us to cook meals, knit blankets, work alongside our youth; teach a class; or baptize a new baby . . . or maybe 10 new babies.

What I know for sure is that Mary risked her place in the community to serve not just *her* Lord, but *our* Lord. And we cannot let *that* go to waste!

To God be all glory, now and forevermore. Amen.

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