

Sermon on John 12:1-9
Fifth Sunday in Lent, April 7, 2019
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

In polite society, being extreme in your beliefs or behavior, and extravagant in love, makes one suspect. Lutherans have the reputation for being modest in character, avoiding the extremes in faith or emotion. Perhaps too often we seek to live up to the stereotype, rather than testing it, or proving it wrong!

But last week, we heard of the extravagant, lavish love of a father for his prodigal son – “prodigal” being an adjective that also means “lavish” or “extravagant”. So when the son’s story was that of spending all of his inheritance in lavish living, we consider his behavior sinful – for he had wasted all that his father had freely given to him. And then it was all gone. He had found himself penniless and hungry, sleeping in a pen with the pigs. But then he “came to himself”, waking up to how his unthinking wastefulness had cost him everything, and his transformation began. He remembered the generous love of his father, and the home where he had always been welcome. Did he dare repent of his sins and return to his father? He knew his older brother would give him grief for this, and be angry at him. But he had confidence in his father accepting him back home, because he knew how much he loved him, and his generosity knew no bounds. And sure enough, when he returned home his father welcomed him back with open arms. He embraced his son and threw him a lavish party, and asked his other son to let go of his jealous anger and join the party. But his elder son was just as extreme and lavish with his anger, and refused. So we witnessed in this parable of the prodigal son and father, how lavish and extreme these three were, in very different ways. But the lavish, extravagant, prodigal love of the father who welcomed his wayward son home is the main point of the story – that, and how rare it is in our world to witness a love so unconditional and forgiving. Few of us can imagine ourselves or anyone else being so forgiving, until sometimes we experience it in our own lives, or even give another that same measure of love.

Today we heard in the gospel story another example of love that is truly extravagant – so much so that the others in the story couldn’t understand it! Except for Jesus! The setting was the home of Jesus’ friends Mary, Martha and their brother, Lazarus. In the previous chapter of John, Lazarus had taken ill and died, and already been buried by the time Jesus arrived. But when Jesus heard the mourning cries of Lazarus’s neighbors, and saw the grief of his sisters, he, too, was overcome with emotion, and Jesus wept. Then Jesus prayed, and did a very extreme thing: he raised a dead man from the dead! He shouted for Lazarus to come out from his grave, and sure enough, the dead man came out! The grief of

his sisters was turned to joy, and the people who witnessed this great miracle spread the good news. But the high priests and Pharisees were afraid that this act would lead many to believe in Jesus (they were right), and from then on they plotted how to have Jesus killed. Their need to hold on to power was extreme.

Today's story begins when Jesus visited Mary, Martha and Lazarus's home, on his way to Jerusalem, six days before Passover. Once again, Martha served dinner – for hospitality and cooking were her gift! But Mary didn't only sit at Jesus' feet to listen to his teaching. This time, Mary showed her gratitude and love for Jesus with a very extravagant, lavish act of love. She took an expensive jar of sweet perfume, knelt at Jesus feet and anointed his feet, wiping them with her hair. I don't think you and I have ever witnessed such a thing, such a lavish display of loving affection. It filled the house with the aroma of this perfume. If Martha's gift was hospitality, familiar and accepted gratefully by Jesus and his disciples, Mary's gift was to find a way to express love for Jesus in a physical action that became a symbol which was memorable as well as controversial.

But Judas and the other disciples didn't understand what Mary had done this, or what it meant. Judas spoke their question for them all, and was blamed for it by the author of John's gospel. He asked "*Why was this perfume not sold for 300 denarii and the money given to the poor?*" It was a very good question, considering how Jesus challenged all of them to be generous to the poor. Hadn't he just recently fed 5,000 hungry people with a young boy's meager contribution of a basket with five loaves of bread and two fish? Isn't this what Jesus had taught them? What a waste of expensive perfume, when so many were poor and hungry! So there, Jesus said it, in words that were stuck on the tongues of the others, who hadn't dared speak them. They were cowards, and Judas was extremely bold in his challenge to Jesus over what Mary had done. But the disciples later called him evil, and the gospel writer inserts the scandalous accusation that Judas was a thief, who stole from the common purse held by the disciples. (Yet Jesus never called Judas a thief.) So perhaps it was jealousy, or the need to show how evil was part of Judas character. How else could they explain his later betrayal of Jesus to the high priest?

Jesus' answer to Judas was simultaneously simple and complex. First, he said "*Leave Mary alone.*" Good, he defended her loving act. But then, "*She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.*" Was this a mysterious foreshadowing of the day that was coming closer in Jerusalem, Jesus' upcoming crucifixion? But did Jesus really know what was ahead for him? Then he said, "*You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.*"

There, that did it. Jesus confuses all of us with that. Some have traditionally read this to mean that there will always be people who are poor, so it's good to have compassion for them, but it's a higher priority to show deference and care for Jesus. Does he mean that it's more important to worship our Lord than to feed

your neighbor? It seems so out of character for Jesus. But this is how many Christians have learned to interpret Jesus' words. It makes some faithful people focus on the "hereafter", with thoughts of heaven over responding to their neighbor's need. However, though it is well and good to be thankful for the promised gift of salvation, with eternal life with our Lord, faith in God's promises isn't meant to replace God's priority of showing love for our neighbor. Love is not an "either/or" (either you love God or you love for your neighbor!). It's a "both/and"!

The tragedy is that too often the Church has been led by such thinking to expend lavish sums of money on beautiful church buildings, great art and wonderful music for worship, in order to show extravagant praise for God, while neglecting the poor who often live right across the street, sit on our church steps, or stand on corners down the block begging for donations. It can lead us to saying that we keep in our "thoughts and prayers" the many who are killed tragically by gun violence, in horrific school shootings, while we don't make our political representatives lift a finger to address the causes of gun violence, or stop the influx of weapons into our communities and schools.

So Jesus says "*the poor you always have with you.*" The translation of the Greek could also be: "*keep the poor among you always.*" If so, then what does Jesus expect us to do? See them, listen to their stories, have mercy and some compassion! Keep them close, don't turn them away. If Jesus said, "Your neighbor you always have with you," what would he expect us to do about that? He would say, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Limiting ourselves to "thoughts and prayers" just doesn't cut it, when the stakes are life and death. Jesus wants us to love one another lavishly, with great generosity, just as we want to be loved ourselves, or love our children.

The truth is, most of us do know how to love – *lavishly, generously*, and can show our love to the extreme. Most of us see others love lavishly every day, and do so ourselves when the person is close to us. We can even amaze ourselves by what we will do for our own sick children, made uncomfortable or suffering due to illness or sadness. I remember caring for my mother and my father in their final years before dying – and it was easy to do, and the simplest, most mundane task was never too hard. I guess we learn about loving this way from our parents' care for us – if we are fortunate to have parents who love us, thanks be to God! I remember how it felt like a privilege to rub lotion onto my father's legs, arms, and back when he could not do it himself, especially as he lay dying in hospice. Nothing is too hard, when we do it out of love, for someone we genuinely love. And often we observe such care given by nurses, therapists and orderlies, who are not even related to our loved ones!

So, Jesus' point is, his invitation and challenge is, why not love this lavishly for your neighbor, as you do your family, or your youngest child? Why not love the poor, as you say you love me – seeing that those who are poor will always have need, and live so close by you?! There are so many, that they should be easy to find! Statistics say that at least 46.5 million people in America, 1 out of every 5 children, are living in poverty today, an increase of more than 9 million since 2008. All in the midst of unprecedented wealth, when the top 1% of our population owns 43% of the nation's wealth, the top 5% own 72% of the wealth, and the bottom 80% own just 7% of the wealth. Jesus calls us to overcome this discrepancy with concrete acts of love, not just as individuals, but as communities and as a nation.

We do know how to show love, as God does, with concrete actions. Last Wednesday evening we heard how, from the words of Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, chapter 13: "*Be patient. Be kind. Don't be arrogant or rude. Do not insist on your own way, or be irritable or resentful. Bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things. Have faith, hope and love, all three, but the greatest of these is love.*" Jesus challenges you and me to do this for those who are poor among us, and those whom we consider difficult to love. Love your neighbor, and not only those who are kind to you. Love those who do you wrong, and pray for those who persecute you (instead of plotting revenge)! Because the greatest power in the world is not hate, rather, it is love! Because love is from God, it is a power that comes to you and me from God, as a gift of the spirit – so LOVE WINS! Even when evil seems to be winning, love wins in the end, because love is from God. This is the love that Jesus taught us, and Mary showed so lavishly, when she anointed Jesus' feet. It's a love that we do have within us. So why not show it? Amen.