

**March 13, 2022**

**John 12:1-8**

**Rev. Kelley L. Becker**

One of the things I like the best about being one of your pastors is that I get to witness your extravagant generosity in so many ways. For example, I am consistently amazed at the volume of food you contribute to our Love in a Pantry ministry. We started Love in a Pantry near the beginning of the COVID pandemic for a couple of reasons. First, since most of the ways in which we were serving the community were not safe for most of us, we needed a new way to serve. And second, we became aware that there are people on this side of town who struggle to access services aimed at food insecurity on the other side of town. We were looking for a new way of doing ministry and we became aware of a specific need. Now we have two cabinets in which we regularly stock non-perishable food, and anyone can come and contribute to the cabinets or take what they need. It is used every day. And it has been a way for people who are not part of DCC to contribute to our ministry as well.

As I said, you have been very generous. A while ago, I noticed that one family in the church was doing something I would describe as extravagant or over the top generous for our neighbors that depend on Love in a Pantry. Recognizing that, for the most part, the food in the pantry consists of the items most families need to make sure nobody goes to bed hungry, they decided to provide something more. Nickole and her daughter, Adley, made birthday party packets which included an aluminum baking pan, a cake mix, frosting, oil, birthday candles, festive plates, and a birthday card. When I asked Adley about what they were doing, she told me that everybody should get to celebrate their birthday. And she was right. It was an extravagant display of generosity and a recognition that everyone's life, regardless of their economic status, should include more than just what we typically think of as "necessary."

Today's story contains a similar act of extravagant generosity performed by Mary. Last week, in the story of Mary and Martha's brother Lazarus' resurrection, the sisters were feeling a lot of big feelings and understandably so. Their friend, Jesus, was not there when Lazarus died. By the time he did arrive, Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days and the sisters were heavily grieving. Jesus said to them, "I am the resurrection and the life." And true to his word, he resurrected Lazarus. In

this story we will see that when Jesus talks about himself in terms of being “the life,” he means abundant life. This is John 12:1-8.

**12** Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup> There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. <sup>3</sup> Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. <sup>4</sup> But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup> “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” <sup>6</sup> (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) <sup>7</sup> Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup> You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

Lazarus, who, in the last story, had been a symbol of death and despair, here, is full of life. He was sharing a meal, a symbol of abundance, with his sisters and their friends. Imagine the feelings in the room as they gathered. Jesus must have known his time with them was ending and the ones sitting with him that night knew it too. He had caused quite a stir and that would not go unanswered by the authorities. The joy of Lazarus very much alive and the grief of Jesus whose time was short collided. It was all there in that one room, around one table. Mary’s response to the moment and to Jesus added a strong fragrance to the room. “This holy moment was felt, bodily. In Jesus’ feet, in the hands and hair of Mary, in the senses of all in the room breathing in the scented air. A smell of grief and love and care all held together...The extravagance of Mary’s purchase, a very costly perfume, was met equally by the extravagance of her action - showering Jesus with love and affection and care by even using her hair on his feet. She held back nothing - neither her money, nor her goals, nor her ego, nor any insecurity kept her from this manifestation of profound love.” (*enfleshed: liturgy that matters*-John 12:1-8, verb tenses altered)

And then there was Judas, unable to be fully present to the joy or the grief. Though he was physically there, his heart was not. He missed the holiness of the moment. I imagine he sensed that everyone else was experiencing something he was not. And instead of admitting that, he criticized Mary’s extravagance and reduced her generosity and love to a monetary transaction, “Rather than spend

almost a year's wages on that perfume, you could have done more practical things with all of that money." I mean...Judas is right. Jesus did not need to be anointed. The room did not need to be filled with the aroma of her love and devotion. It was not necessary at all, in the same way, I guess, birthday parties are not necessary.

Before we get too down on Judas, let's admit that sometimes we all tend to act as if the most practical, efficient way is the best way. For as long as I have been in church leadership, I have been aware of the tension that exists between the need to get things done and to be good stewards of our resources and the call to truly enter into the lives and suffering of one another and our neighbors, to be present and extend radical hospitality. If we are to represent God in this world then we must recognize that since God is a God of extravagant, over the top generosity and love, we are called to the same. In the kin-dom of God, birthday parties are necessary, loving people hard is the norm, recognizing that the things that enrich our own lives, can and should enrich the lives of people who are experiencing poverty and other forms of suffering. I am talking about things like art, music, candles, perfume, pets, good books, and birthday cakes.

Don't misunderstand me. If someone is starving, we aren't just going to throw some confetti at them and sing happy birthday. I think what this text is here to remind us is that we can do both. We can serve our neighbors food and make sure we celebrate their birthdays. We can provide cold weather gear to the ones who are unsheltered and facilitate opportunities for them to create and enjoy art and music. The kin-dom of God is not an either/or place, it is a both/and place; it is a place of abundance. God promises all of us an abundant life, not just the ones who can afford it. Throughout history, though, abundance hasn't come without a struggle. And since it is Women's History Month, it's a good time to recognize that very often, women have been a big part of that struggle.

On January 12, 1912, workers at the American Woolen Company Mills in Lawrence, Massachusetts, opened their pay envelopes to find that their wages had been cut. The company workers were predominantly immigrant women, and they weren't having it. They took to the streets in protest. The "Bread and Roses Strike" was the first major strike of textile workers in New England. Carried on throughout a brutally cold winter, the strike united dozens of immigrant communities under the leadership of the Industrial Workers of the World and was led largely by women.

In addition to a generally favorable settlement, the strikers have been credited with inventing the moving picket line, a strategy that made it impossible to arrest them for loitering. They won pay increases, time-and-a-quarter pay for overtime, and a promise of no discrimination against the strikers. The name “Bread and Roses” is taken from a poem, written by James Oppenheim, which appeared in *American Magazine* in 1911. The poem is printed on the insert in your bulletin. Initially, people thought Oppenheim was inspired to write the poem by a strike sign carried by protesters that said, “We want bread, but we want roses, too!” The truth is the poem came first and it was embraced by the strikers and the notion of “Bread and Roses” has become a cry for justice and dignity for women workers around the world.

The phrase “bread and roses” expresses what I have been talking about his morning: Human beings need more than basic needs and a “barely scraping by” existence. We need beauty, the beauty that comes from education, the opportunity to appreciate nature, art, music, and literature. These things are not luxuries and unnecessary extravagances. Consider how they affect mental health and our ability to appreciate and understand people who are different from us. God’s dream is for everyone, whether they have money or not, to live a life of abundance.

At the end of the story, Jesus said, “You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.” When we read the words gospel authors put in Jesus’ mouth, not only should we not assume that Jesus actually said them, but we should also not assume that we can interpret exactly what the author was trying to tell us. In this case, we can be sure, based on what we know of Jesus, he was not suggesting that he didn’t care about poverty, or the people affected by poverty. That would be inconsistent with so many Jesus stories in all four gospels. It should be clear to anyone even minimally familiar with Jesus’ life and the ways in which his life revealed the character and heart of God that God was and is deeply concerned about economic justice.

Jesus’ response to Judas’ suggestion that Mary’s actions were impractical or inefficient, is a reference to Deuteronomy 15:11. In the first eleven verses of Deuteronomy 15, the author outlined the process for remission of debts every 7 years for the Israelites; an opportunity for the ones living under the oppression of

poverty to get a fresh start and hopefully, prevent people from having to spend their whole lives attempting to pay someone back; an opportunity for abundant life.

Verse 11 reads: "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'" For the author to have Jesus say something so closely related to the words which are found in the middle of a section about justice for the people living with debt, makes it pretty clear that Jesus was not calling for neglect of attention or resources on economic justice. "One can imagine that Jesus knew Judas well enough at this point that Jesus was responding less to Judas' suggestion and more to Judas' heart - calling Judas back to the law of his own faith with his reference to Torah without taking too much time/attention away from the sacred moment that was occurring." (*enfleshed: liturgy that matters*, John 12:1-8)

It is true that there are times when money is the most important resource we can give. When someone comes to the church needing a prescription filled or fuel for their vehicle to get to work, offering them an opportunity to do a paint and pour isn't going to cut it. But as I think about the idea of a both/and kin-dom of God, I wonder, what would it look like for us to not only help our neighbors with their basic needs, but to also intentionally infuse joy and abundance into their lives, into our relationships with them?

This scene of Jesus and his friends around the table reminds us that relationships and beauty and creating safe, sacred space are important to the work of bringing "wholeness to a fragmented world," to use our denomination's language. This includes the work of making justice happen now, whether in the form of poverty or transphobia or racism or misogyny. Thinking of the ones experiencing injustice as nothing but a problem to be solved from a distance or with detached tools like money alone, hides the truth that human beings are so much more than the causes and effects of their suffering. We need so much more than bread alone to survive.

We need roses too. Amen.