

Extravagant Love
March 13, 2016 – Lent 5C
First Lutheran Church, St. Peter, MN
Texts: John 12:1-8

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

A few months ago, I had the opportunity to watch the movie *Babette's Feast*. If you haven't seen it, I highly recommend it. It's set in a small coastal village in 19th century Denmark where two elderly sisters, Martine and Philippa, lead a small and extremely pietistic branch of Lutheranism that was founded by their late father. One day, a woman named Babette appears on the sisters' doorstep and pleads that the women help her. Babette is penniless and fleeing from the civil war in her native France, so she offers to earn her keep by cooking for the sisters. The women take Babette in and, eventually, she learns to make the bland and basic cuisine that the sisters prefer.

Some 14 years later, Babette wins the French lottery and suddenly has a small fortune of 10,000 Francs. The sisters assume that Babette will return to France, but she insists on first making them a lavish French dinner to thank them for their hospitality and honor what would have been their father's 100th birthday. So the sisters invite all of their friends to this dinner and Babette goes all out. Course after course of the most amazing food these people have ever tasted paired with delicious wines all while Babette is working away in the kitchen. Well, the guests at the dinner are unsure how to act. And they're worried that such delicacies must surely be sinful or even devilish. But eventually, the guests can't help but revel in such an amazing feast.

After the dinner is finished, Babette admits that she spent the entirety of her 10,000 Francs on this dinner. The sisters are horrified that she wasted all her money on this one meal,

but for Babette, this was an outpouring of her appreciation for all they had done for her. An extravagant demonstration of her love for them.

Today's gospel text takes place at another dinner party and maybe some context would help understand what's going on here. This story comes from the beginning of the 12th chapter of John's Gospel. In the 11th chapter, Jesus is preaching and teaching when he receives word that his good friend Lazarus is very sick and close to death. The disciples don't want Jesus to go see him because they are worried that he may be attacked or even killed. But Jesus decides that his love for his friend outweighs any concern for his own life, so he sets out to go to Lazarus. But by the time he gets there, Lazarus has already died. After consoling and crying with Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, Jesus does something amazing – he goes to Lazarus' tomb and commands for him to come out. And all of a sudden, out walks Lazarus who had been dead for four days. The crowd rejoices! But John tells us that the Pharisees and the religious leaders saw all of this and knew something had to be done. This Jesus had suddenly gone from a mere annoyance to a serious and credible threat to their power. "So from that day," John says, they plotted and "planned to put him to death." By restoring Lazarus' life, Jesus put his own in jeopardy.

Now we find ourselves back at today's gospel reading. Jesus and his disciples return to Mary, Martha, and Lazarus' house for a feast to celebrate Lazarus' return to life. I imagine there was delicious food, loud music, and joyous conversation as the sisters try to thank Jesus for what he did. I'm also guessing most people there are oblivious to the very real threat of consequences resulting from this miracle. But somehow Mary knew what was going on. Mary knew that Jesus had literally given up his own life to give her brother Lazarus the chance to live again. And she was right. The very next day, Jesus would ride in to Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday.

Just a few days after this dinner, Jesus would die on the cross. So at that dinner, Mary did the only thing she could think of, she knelt down on the floor and began anointing Jesus for his burial – beginning with his feet. And she didn't use any old perfume. No, Mary poured out a pound of pure nard, which we are told is worth 300 denarii – roughly a year's wages. In our modern terms, that's tens of thousands of dollars that Mary just poured on Jesus' feet!

I imagine the party around these two abruptly stopped. "What is she *doing*?" the disciples mouth to each other. One is even bold enough to say what the others are thinking, "Why did she waste all that money? We should have given it to the poor! Doesn't she know how many people we could have helped with that?" The disciples don't understand what Mary is doing or why Jesus is allowing it. They don't see the extravagant love and gratitude and devotion that she is pouring out mingled with the perfume. They don't comprehend the holy work she is performing.

And then Jesus replies with what, on its face, sounds very troubling. "Leave her alone," he says. "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." Now those words make us pause, make me pause at least. I admit that I struggle with what Jesus' says here. These words have long been used as an excuse for complacency or inaction against poverty. They have been touted by those who say, "Why even bother trying to help? Jesus said there will always be poor people – we shouldn't even try."

But that's obviously not what Jesus is saying here. He has spent his entire ministry caring for the poor and the outcast and the hungry. And he told us that by reaching out to the least of these, who are members of his family, we are really serving Jesus face-to-face. Just like the disciples at the dinner, we may miss what's really happening here. I think Jesus is saying, "If you really follow me, you will seek out the same people I did. The poor will always be with you

because that's where your work is. And that's where you'll find me." In the words of one pastor, "Jesus was not foretelling the forever fate of the poor, but defining the nature of the community called by his name."

Maybe you still think the disciples have a point – Mary *should* have given all that money to the poor. I get that. I struggle with that too. But this is how Mary is showing her love and gratitude to Jesus who just saved her brother. And maybe we can understand where she's coming from when we realize that we often spend tens of thousands of dollars on a wedding or a funeral celebrating love and our loved ones. We too like to be extravagant in our displays of love.

Nevertheless, despite all the objections, there is Mary, pouring out her love for Jesus without any thought of cost – the same way God's love is poured out for us. God's love poured out in this extravagant feast of bread and wine. God's love poured out [over little Corban James and each of us] in the waters of our baptism. God's love poured out on the cross. We can learn a lot from Mary's example – that extravagant love is how we can even attempt to show gratitude for the love that we have received.

We may not be able to literally anoint Jesus' feet, but we can still love Christ in the world through our service to the poor around us.

To reach out to the lost and rejected.

To clothe the naked and liberate the oppressed.

To advocate for justice and peace in our communities and the world.

To donate, volunteer, and pack the pews for the food shelf.

And yes, to anoint and comfort the dying.

We are invited to kneel right beside Mary and join her extravagant and holy outpouring of love,

gratitude, and devotion to Jesus who died for us. Jesus who gives us confidence in new life.

Jesus who we see in the faces of the poor whom we will always have with us. And through this extravagant love, we give thanks and praise to God who first loved us.