

**Message**  
**March 20-21, 2010**  
**2 Corinthians 1:15-22; John 12:1-8**  
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The time is getting very near. Next week Jesus will mount a simple donkey and ride triumphantly into Jerusalem as people throw down their cloaks and wave palm branches in salute of their new king, crying out hosannas. The time is getting very near to come to the end of our Lenten disciplines and march into resurrected life, the new life of Easter.

Jesus is getting ready. Today, Jesus is in Bethany, just 2 miles from Jerusalem. If we're reading Mark or Matthew's gospel, the truth is, Jesus has already made his triumphal entry. But, today, in John's reading, he's still a day away. And, Jesus knows that just after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, there won't be much celebrating. So, he does what we all like to do when big change is on the horizon. He prepares himself, surrounding himself with those he loves in a place that brings comfort, a place of peace and quiet from the tension of Jerusalem.

In Jerusalem faithful Jews are gathering for the Passover feast; the celebration remembering God's saving grace and protection as God frees them from bondage. Bethany is something like a suburb of Jerusalem. So, as crowds gather and there's no room in the inn in Jerusalem, you just travel a bit southeast, closer to the Jordan River, to find a place to stay.

Bethany serves another purpose. It's the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, two sisters and a brother who are dear friends of Jesus. This isn't just a pre-Passover feast. This is celebration of life party. This is a home where miracles happen. The last time Jesus visited this home, he wept. His dear friend Lazarus had been dead four days. Jesus calls out Lazarus from the tomb, restoring him to life. Lazarus' death serves as a witness to the glory of God in Jesus. Many came to believe. Others were afraid and decide to tell the authorities. They plot to kill Jesus. It's no longer safe for Jesus. Along with his disciples he withdraws along the desert, to Ephraim, until he's called to the comfort of Mary, Martha and Lazarus' home once again. But, the Roman officials can't have someone drawing crowds by the hundreds, usurping their authority. So, Bethany is now a place where there is some risk.

It's our natural instinct to protect those we love and cherish. Friends just know when things aren't going well. And for Jesus it's a delicate time. So, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, they're all about offering comfort and tender love. Gathering at the table, Jesus is the honored guest. Martha, humbly offers herself up as a servant; a departure from Jesus' previous visit when she arrogantly takes issue with Jesus' delay in coming to restore Lazarus.

Joining Jesus at the table is Lazarus. He must still be in a daze; somehow trying to take in the glory of God sitting right that at the table with him. Lazarus sits, probably oblivious to the compromise Jesus has made. Restoring life puts Jesus on the radar. But, this is how it is with Jesus; he's always just offering himself up, making the sacrifice for us.

In the middle of all the festivities, Mary, sister to Lazarus, excessive and obsessive in her love, desiring only to offer Jesus hospitality and comfort, comes

barreling in with a pound of ointment, sweet smelling nard. The perfume is costly and rare, coming from the roots of the spikenard plant, where it grows wild in high elevations of the Himalayas. Today, we can order this precious oil at \$100.00 for about 2 ounces; and Mary has a whole pound valuing somewhere around a year's wages. Mary knows the delicacy of this sweet fragrance. It's familiar to her. She knows her scripture. She's reminded of the passage in the Song of Solomon read at the Passover feast that refers to the perfume as a sign of the love between God and Israel.

Extravagant in her love, oblivious to decorum, Mary drops to her knees, rubbing the feet of Jesus, she consecrates him with the precious oil. She's not going for his head, where a royal official would be marked, as we read in Matthew and Mark's gospel. Instead, she carefully rubs his feet; worn feet that have walked the dirty dusty roads of Judea. Mary must know. Her humble act is a sign of Jesus' servanthood, where just days later, sharing a final meal with those closest, just hours before his death, he too will stoop and wash the feet of his disciples.

And then, adding to her boldness, Mary, defying the custom of all proper young maidens, and raising the eyebrows of all the men in the room, she fearlessly loosens her hair, like that of an immoral woman and caresses the feet of her Lord and Savior. Outrageous, extravagant in her generous acts of love, abundantly surrendering all she has to her Lord, Mary rubs out any stench of death from Lazarus that may be hovering over the table.

Now, dinner with Jesus is never going to be just an ordinary meal. This is how it is with Jesus. Jesus loves. And, he loves extravagantly. So, at the table with Jesus and Lazarus, and who knows who else, is Judas; the one who, in just days, will sell his greedy soul to the Roman officials for 30 pieces of silver and had Jesus over to his death.

Judas is the one sneering, shifting his eyes back and forth, selfishly looking for a way to make himself shine in the moment. And, that's exactly what he does. In his self-righteous piety, he proclaims concern for the poor. "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"

The sacred moment of offering is harshly contrasted with the bitter complaint from selfish Judas; the only time we hear him speak in the entire gospel. He's a traitor, a betrayer, and yet, Jesus trusts him, with the common purse, with his friendship, with his mission to spread the good news.

Maybe it is that Judas serves as a reminder for us; that when our heart is hardened and our words are hurtful and bitter, critical of those around us, maybe it's the time for us to look in the mirror and examine our own selves. Jesus offers Judas a glorious moment of generous love and forgiveness, and Judas fails to seize the opportunity of repentance until too late. In the end, Jesus validates the purpose of Mary's extravagant, obsessive love.

Jesus comes back, "Leave her alone..." Let her be extravagant with her love; let Mary give of herself all that she has to give, a fragrant offering of love and mercy. Somehow Mary knows that the days ahead will be brutal. So, she offers all that she has, all that she is in thanksgiving for the love of Jesus Christ.

Pastor, Frances Chan, writes in his book, *Crazy Love, Overwhelmed By a Relentless God*, that *people who are obsessed with Jesus give freely and openly, without censure...are more concerned with obeying God than doing what is expected.... People who are obsessed with God are lovers, risk takers, friends of all, crazy ones, humble,*

*servers, givers...* This is our wild, extravagant Mary, who makes a crazy fool out of herself she's so obsessed with Jesus' love for her. See, Mary is an offering.

Offering means sacrifice. Sacrifice is generally associated with death. Christ is our ultimate sacrifice, giving himself to the suffering of the cross, overcoming for us our brokenness, gifting us with God's eternal love, grace and mercy so that we may be free in his redeeming love to serve with praise and thanksgiving. So, we, in turn, offer to God, our very selves, all our resources, with great thanksgiving for the death to our old self and rebirth to our new self in Jesus Christ.

Worship is God's work, and redeemed humanity's praise and thanksgiving through faith, says Martin Luther. Faith, of course, is invisible, but is made visible in the visible things of worship. This Lenten season, we've been offering up some teaching, preaching on the purpose of worship; how worship outfits us to be obsessed with God, not just in this holy space, but, outside these doors as well.

We've talked about our worship as centered on the Word, an affirmation of what we believe, prayer and praise through music; and Christ's Table of welcome and hospitality; all visible signs of God's work in us. The final piece about worship to talk about today is our offering and sending.

In our worship we do something called *lex orandi, lex credendi*, we pray what we believe. Another way to say this is the purpose of our worship is not just a way of saying something but a way of becoming something.

Martin Luther also says that from our worship God requires messengers, and administrators, to serve as instruments of God's work. For Mary, and for us, our purpose in serving as instruments of God's work, means sacrificial giving. We are an offering.

An offering, in the simplest form is an expression of our faith and generosity identified with the ultimate offering, Christ's sacrifice for us. We're reminded that our offering is a returning to God with great thanksgiving all that we are and all that we have, which is God's.

Worship means to bow down. But, worship also stems from the core words of faithfulness and service. This week countless numbers of you are giving of your time, talent and treasure, serving to offer up to our CARITAS guests the most hospitable welcome we know how to give. Thank you for your gracious offering.

Recently, a friend taught me what it means to be a faithful offering. Several years ago, my friend discerned that God was calling him to be a father. So, he began working with social workers to learn how best he could parent. He had some challenges. He's a single parent with a very heavy work load and his family support is far away. But, he prayed and waited. Then, he adopted a fine little boy who didn't necessarily feel so fine about himself. This man decided that he would just offer up as much love as Jesus. So he did. The man sacrificed certain parts of his life to love this boy. He adjusted his work schedule. He cut out extra curriculums that didn't include his son. Worship and being a part of this faith community became an essential part of their life. He came to depend on others with Christ Church for support. The boy flourished in the love and grew and grew.

Last year the social workers called my friend again. They had another boy. Now, this boy is older. Life has not been so fair to this fine young man. He's much too young to have suffered the sorrows he's known. But, my friend took the risk and once again offered himself up to love this boy.

Friday morning about 17 of us gathered in the Henrico County Circuit Courtroom number 5 with Judge Hicks presiding. Judge Hicks said a few words to my friend, to the soon to be adopted young man, and to his younger brother. Then Judge Hicks signed the papers, with a pen the young man crafted himself, officially naming him and making him a son and a brother. We all clapped and cheered with tears running down our faces.

Then Judge Hicks invited us into the inner sanctum of the courtroom. We encircled the young man and his brother. His new dad spoke a solemn vow, that never, under any circumstances, would he permit this young man to suffer pain and sorrow again. And, in making that offering, the new son in turn offered himself back to his new dad, to be the very best older son he could possibly be. We bowed our heads and asked for God's blessing upon this miracle. We gave thanks for how God works in our lives; for how he calls us to trust and love; for how his mercy endures forever.

The apostle tells us in his letter to the church of Corinth, don't be fickle about our faith. Say "yes;" not "yes or no", but "yes". Say, "yes," to the Christ within us. We're not ordinary. We're offerings to Christ our Lord. So, may we serve knowing all that we are and all that we have is from the saving grace of Jesus Christ in our lives. Amen.