# Extravagant Love

## 5th Sunday of Lent, Year C ‑ John 12:1-8

*based on a sermon preached by the Rector at St. Paul’s, Henderson, March 17, 2013*

*preached by the Rector at St. Paul’s, Henderson, March 13, 2016*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Whenever I hear this morning’s portion of John’s Gospel, my mind goes in a couple of different directions. No surprise there, I don’t suppose – “Squirrel!”. Thankfully, one direction is toward what our EfM classes calls theological reflection, but we’ll get back to that in a moment. The other direction is to my friend, Betsy Bennett, and the building of Bedient Opus #74, the half-million-dollar new organ for St. Mark’s Pro-Cathedral in Hastings., Nebraska while I was Dean there.

I think, having been built over the course of nearly a year and a half, we installed the new organ in 2004, which means my friend Betsy had already been ordained as our *Deacon* Betsy when it was installed. In the final phases of the project, one of us was usually on hand to supervise, as literally *tons* of pieces of the organ were unloaded and unwrapped to fill the staging area in the Parish Hall – structural components, and wind chests, and tracking boards, and pipes, and pipes, and pipes, hundreds of them, from the teeny-tinsiest that produce the high notes, to the great big ones that produce the low, to the even bigger wooden ones that produce sounds you *feel* more than hear. My personal favorite components were part of the decorative façade that projected out into the Chancel, a pair of hand-carved-wood winged lions, the traditional symbol for St. Mark the Evangelist. Betsy’s favorite part was *also* part of the façade. Or perhaps I should say they were her *least* favorite part, because she nearly had a fit when they unwrapped the dozen or so pipes that would stand at the very front of the great instrument.

Unlike the rest of the pipes, formed from various trade-secret alloys of lead and tin and zinc and antimony, these were plated with a touch of nickel silver and had been painstakingly polished to near mirror perfection. But also unlike the rest of the pipes, these would never be sounded, these would never even be attached to a wind chest, these pipes were *purely* decorative, created and installed only to be looked at. That really got under the skin of my first dear deacon. She had not been overly fond of the cost of the organ project from the beginning, but when she saw those shiny symbols of extravagance, she nearly came unhinged. She raised all the same objections as the treasurer in this morning’s Gospel, and I really couldn’t disagree with her that some of that money we had raised might have been put to use reaching out to people that would likely never be touched by the beauty of the magnificent instrument, much less the beauty of those shiny, purely decorative pipes. I finally got Deacon Betsy calmed down when we agreed on a nickname for those monuments of ornamental extravagance. When these days one of us sends the other a text or a Facebook message, we often mention that episode of our life together a dozen years ago, and our thankfulness for the extravagances of life – like our Oil of Nard Pipes.

Here we are coming at last to the end of our Lenten journey, almost at the end of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem. And once again, Jesus pauses on the way, here in the calm before the storm.

The next day, Jesus would go to Jerusalem, riding on a donkey in fulfillment of Zachariah’s prophesy, and the crowd would shout “Hosanna!” and “Halleluiah!” and “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of Lord!” And the next day, the people would hail Jesus as Messiah, the Anointed One, and wonder at the authority and challenge of his teaching. And the next day, Jesus would cleanse the Temple, a sign of *God’s* reign over man’s laws, and the people’s shouts would change form “Hosanna!” to “Crucify him!” Just the *next* *day*, the series of events would be set in motion which would lead him to the cross and to the grave.

But here in the calm before the storm, Jesus had paused one last time to be with his friends Lazarus, Mary, and Martha, just outside that city that kills its prophets. Lazarus, you no doubt remember, was the one Jesus had raised from the dead. And you probably remember his sister Mary, too, for listening at Jesus’ feet while her sister Martha gave her such a hard time for not lending a hand with the preparations. Here in this calm before the storm, Jesus and his friends were eating their Sabbath supper. The lamps were lit. The prayers were sung. And then Mary did something scandalous, and extravagant, and wonderfully, *wonderfully* loving.

Maybe she shouldn’t have done it. Maybe she should have kept her distance and kept her place. Maybe she should have done what was expected. But there would be time enough the next day, to do what *needed* to be done. There would be time enough the next day, for the terrible price of *every* law to be paid in full. There would be time enough the next day, for *every* prophecy to be fulfilled. There would be time enough the next day, and the next, and the next, for scandalous love to allow the law, and every perversion of it, to spit upon mercy and nail hope to a cross. And so, here in the calm before the storm, as at his birth, *another* Mary said yes to *another* scandalous proposition, with her fragrant balm, Jesus’s friend began to turn the tables, from law to love.

This stuff Mary poured out, this oil of nard, this anointing oil made from a flower that grew at the other end of the world, was very rare and *very* expensive. This stuff, so valuable it was sealed in a carved stone jar, was one of the finest, most costly things even *available* in Mary’s world. For a laborer, say a carpenter from Nazareth, three hundred denarii were the wages of a *year’s* work. For Mary, this stuff may well have been everything that was personally hers. Something this valuable shouldn’t be wasted, and Mary might have made her point by anointing her master and friend with just a little of the precious stuff. But here in the calm before the storm, if only for a few moments more, Jesus is here with those that love him. And so, as at his birth, kings presented him with frankincense and myrrh, Mary brought out the gift set aside for his burial, and poured it *all* out, the extravagant excess running out onto the dusty floor, to prepare her friend, her teacher, her *Lord* for his journey to the grave.

Where did Mary learn this kind of scandalous, extravagant love? Why, where she *always* was – there sitting at the feet of *Jesus*. Here he was, the King of kings, the Lord of lords, he without whom nothing seen or unseen was created – and yet Jesus had no place to lay his head. Angels proclaimed his birth, shepherds ran to see him, and wise men fell to their knees in adoration – and yet he was cradled in a manger. He turned water into wine, he stilled storms, he fed multitudes, he made the blind to see, the deaf to hear, and the lame to dance away singing – and yet here in the shadow of his Passion, he sat with a handful of friends bathed in his own burial liniments. Perhaps because she had spent all that time at Jesus’ feet, genuinely *listening* to what he was saying, Mary knew that if she were going to show her love for Jesus, there *was* no next day, or a next day, or a next day. So with the vial of oil, Mary poured out her heart and her soul, to anoint the holy Anointed One of God. Here in the calm before the storm, John tells us that the whole house was *filled* with the fragrance of this singular act of love.

Outside this fragrant room, across the valley, in the close, bustling streets and at the heights of the Temple, the Passover preparations had already begun. The People of God were already beginning to gather, already bringing their sacrificial lambs to offer at the altar. The next day, Jesus would offer *himself* up to be *the* Lamb of God, sacrificed for the sins of the whole world. The next day, he would take his place among thieves and murders. The next day, he would bear the suffering and shame of the entire human race. The next day, and the next, and the next, Jesus would pour out the only sinless life that has ever lived, an extravagant excess of mercy, an extravagant excess of grace, an extravagant excess of love, to reclaim every sinner, *every* sinner that has ever lived – like me… and you.

Perhaps if we still ourselves, perhaps if we return once again to sit at the feet of our Lord and Savior, perhaps, here in the calm before that storm, we can call to our own heart and soul, the fragrance of such scandalous, extravagant, *wonderful* love. And perhaps, that will be enough.