

## Extravagant Love to reveal an Extravagant God!

### We want to see Jesus!

John 12:1-8

John 12:20-26

When I was in Jamaica in 1982 serving Hope United Church as their Student Pastor, unmarried, and at the ripe old age of 26, I occasionally was asked to counsel married people about their marriage issues. Needless to say, I was somewhat out of my depth! A woman came to me one day and complained that her husband never told her he loved her. So, I asked: Does he give you gifts? Yes. Does he make sure that you and your children are provided for? Yes. Does he share the household responsibilities? Yes. Is he faithful? Yes. Then, what's your problem I said? He never tells me that he loves me. Well I said, why don't you ask him? Somewhat reluctantly she agreed. Bad move! His response was, "What do you think I married you for? Your good looks? Ha!" The beginning and end of my career as a marriage counsellor!

How do we let someone know that we truly love them? I think this story about Mary of Bethany gives us some handles on this question. Not only had Jesus changed her personal life, but he had come to her family in the hour of its greatest need. Mary & Martha had been privy to the greatest of all the miracles Jesus did, when He raised Lazarus from the dead. Now it seems that she had somehow grasped what few of the disciples had grasped: that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem to die. So, in an act of sheer extravagance, Mary blew a year's pay (that's the equivalent of £20K today) in one incredible and unforgettable moment. We don't know where Mary had obtained this ointment or why she was keeping it. For some reason, Mary had not used it for the burial of her brother Lazarus. There is no doubt she loved her brother but this ointment was so special that it would not even be used on him. Mary had come to this conclusion: that there was only one person worthy of it. Precious though it was, there was

something - someone - far more precious. When the opportunity came to demonstrate her love for Jesus, she took it. He allows her to do the unthinkable - her tears wet his feet, she wipes them with her hair, kisses and anoints them with perfume from her alabaster jar. Wow: a bit sensual don't you think? Mary knew that she needed Jesus yet she was not worthy of Him. Her actions speak of pure humility.

It was a whole pound of ointment - half a kilogram - surely far more than would be needed to show the Lord that she loved Him. A few drops on the head, a few on His feet, and the powerful scent would have proclaimed her message to everyone. But that would not be enough. Mary sets out on a one-way journey. She does not simply uncork the bottle, but according to Mark she breaks it and pours the whole lot out on Jesus.

Can you imagine the reaction? This was a society not noted for public displays of affection between men and women, and here was this woman whom some in that room despised, going right over the top. Now it is interesting that different gospels identify different people as having something to say. Step outside the bounds of society's norms and someone is sure to jump on you! Matthew says that the disciples indignantly asked, "Why this waste?" John narrows it down to Judas and remarks that he would have liked to get hold of some of its value.

Matthew's version makes it plain that the other disciples agreed with Judas' question. Mark tells us that the people in the room reproached Mary. And apparently, lurking in the background, were the Pharisees, who thought the whole thing a scandal! Luke tells us that the host Simon the Pharisee, could not believe that Jesus would allow a sinful woman to do this to Him. But Jesus came back at him with some pretty hard-hitting home truths. First, he asks who is most likely to feel grateful: a man who has been forgiven a small debt, or a man who had been forgiven a great debt? The answer is obvious. Then in very blunt terms, Jesus tells his host that He is a rotten host

because he has not done for Jesus what good hosts would do. But the clincher is this: this woman loves greatly because she recognises how great is the forgiveness God has showered upon her.

This is an important story. Jesus says so when he says that wherever the gospel is preached this story will be told. It is important because it is a story that suggests how to respond to the gospel. Fundamentally the gospel is about sins forgiven, and that forgiveness is simply huge! Sin renders us liable to the wrath of God, yet instead of pouring out that wrath on us, God has chosen instead to pour it out on Jesus (that's the heart of the cross) and Jesus chose to receive it on our behalf. We should never allow ourselves to become blasé about the Gospel. What Mary did was admittedly a very female thing to do. It is not surprising that all the comments made about her actions were made by males, who simply would not have been able to comprehend such a way of showing love. But it is not how you show your love for the Lord that matters, but what is going on in your heart.

We husbands tend to think we can best show our love for our wives in what we do - such as washing up for once while your wife sits down with a good book. To show love for the Lord, a man will think of things to do. But look at the message of Jesus to the Church in Ephesus (Revelation 2). It was apparently full of hard workers, only to be criticised for 'leaving their first love' by Jesus. Sadly, the Work of the Lord had become more important than the Lord of the Work.

We might also apply the endurance test on love. Jesus said of the Ephesians that they were people of patient endurance. He commends this in them twice: "I know your patient endurance" ... "I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary." It is true that true love sticks with it. That is why the marriage vows require the couple to say: "until death do us part." We believe true love is not transitory. True love lasts.

Yet apparently even that was not enough. The Ephesians were working hard, and cheerfully putting up with difficulties. They were still zealous for the truth and watchful of heretics - something that today the Church is much less sharp on. They were sticking to their faith no matter what. But fundamentally there was something wrong! They had 'left their first love'. It had been very much characteristic of their relationship with God, but they had become careless about it, and now it was gone.

So what is the message of Mary of Bethany? Simply this: that love sometimes requires extravagant acts of renewal. It requires renewal in our marriages (which is why Lorna and I regularly attend and have in the past led Marriage Encounter Weekends). It requires renewal in our relationship with God (a fresh encounter with Him, a Holy Spirit moment).

Did the man in my first story not love his wife? I knew them both and I am quite sure he did. But love needs to be expressed, not only in those everyday deeds that do indeed mean that we love, but also in those extravagant deeds that draw attention to our love as nothing else can. We can get so busy doing the things we do because we love God, but neglect to stop every now and then and just express our love for Him in some special way.

I am not talking about just singing love songs to the Lord. Some of those songs I fear are so schmaltzy that they turn God into a sugar daddy: they neglect His awesome power and majesty. But some songs express our love in acceptable phrases and terms, and it is right and proper to express such sentiments when we are together in worship or even in our times alone with the Lord. But this is not enough. We need to go further. We need to look for opportunities to smash alabaster jars of very precious ointment, and to pour out their contents on the Lords head and feet.

Here is the test: what is more precious to you than anything else you own? What is your alabaster jar? Only you know?

Yours will probably be completely different to that of anyone else. You alone will know what breaking your alabaster jar means? For now, is the season and time to break it and pour it out, and to rekindle your love for the Lord?

Wash the dishes for your wife without her asking, and she will think you love her and probably suspect that you have an ulterior motive! Bring her a rose in your teeth and she will know that you love her. And that you have ulterior motives. But pointless and extravagant acts of love have this wonderful side effect: they reinforce your love; they keep the fires burning. That's why we need to smash our alabaster jars: so that the love we started out with towards our Saviour & Lord will be rekindled in our hearts!

Mary knew that the one who was all-important was Jesus: nothing can compare to Him, nothing can rival Him; He is the lover and restorer of our souls! The Greeks were right: We want to see Jesus! Mary was right: she wanted to be with Jesus! The world/Gomshall needs to see Jesus: not religion, not even this Chapel community - they need/want to see Jesus embodied in His people and let His fragrance animate and fill their lives. Such a Saviour will transform this Nation once again.

So only shameless and extravagant acts of love will do for the one who did the same for us. Smash that Alabaster Jar once and for all. The fragrance of Jesus is unsurpassed.

Pastor David

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