



“Washed in Grace”
Scripture – John 12:1-8
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, April 7, 2019

Judas is right. That pound of pure nard probably should have been sold, and the proceeds given to the poor. Just think what Mary could have done with that money!

She could have sponsored that impromptu feast that took place on the shore of Galilee, when five thousand families shared five loaves and two fish. With that kind of cash, a miracle would have been superfluous. The men, women, and children would have all eaten their fill and had plenty leftover.

Or Mary could have handed that money to any number of worthy souls who’d been reduced to begging for their daily bread ... Like the man who’d been sick for decades but could never make it into the healing waters of Bethesda. Or the boy born blind, whom Jesus found languishing near the pool of Siloam. Three hundred denarii? With that much money, either of those men could have gone home and lived comfortably for the better part of a year. Mary could have sold that costly perfume and simply bought food, medicine or clothes for her poorest neighbors. She could have become the philanthropist of Bethany.

Judas is right. There are so many ways that money could have been used to alleviate suffering. Imagine the number of empty bellies that could have been filled, the number of healing poultices applied, the number of widows and orphans who could have been served. Instead, Mary wastes that money on Jesus’ feet. She pours it down the drain – almost literally.

Yes, by the logic of this world, Judas is right. The perfume should have been sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor. Such an extraordinary sum could have made an extravagant difference in the lives of so many ... at least, for a moment.

But, on the eve of his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus has little patience for the logic of this world. “Leave her alone,” he says to Judas. “You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

With this startling statement, Jesus silences the critique of Judas, and of any who would chastise Mary for being so wasteful. Because that is precisely the point ... Mary is wasteful. She is lavish. She is extravagant in her outpouring of love. When she rises from the table to kneel at Jesus’ feet, Mary does not consider what else a year’s wages could buy. She does not calculate the appropriate sum to spend upon her Lord. She simply gives — fully, freely — trusting that no display of love is too lavish for the one who has come to bestow grace upon grace.

It seems Mary is the first to understand that the logic of this world doesn't hold when we are in the presence of Jesus, because the logic of this world doesn't account for love. It doesn't account for acts of generosity that draw people into relationship, blurring the line between those who give and those who receive. It doesn't account for demonstrations of abundance that cannot be measured in pounds of perfume or a year's worth of wages. The logic of this world doesn't account for expressions of grace that inspire other expressions of grace, until love overflows like costly perfume that fills the world with fragrance.

Mary understands this. So she kneels before Jesus to anoint his feet — not only with pure nard worthy of a king — but with grace upon grace, with lavish love that could never be reduced to a transaction on the books.

If we continue reading we see that Mary's outpouring of love does, indeed, overflow into another expression of grace. Just a few days after this dinner party in Bethany, Jesus again sits at table with his disciples. And, when the meal is finished, he rises from the table and kneels before his friends. Much to their dismay, Jesus washes the feet of John and of Philip and of Peter and of Judas; he goes around the circle, pouring out both water and grace until every one of them has been washed in his love.

Peter protests, giving voice to the disciples' discomfort, because they have not fully grasped that love blurs the line between Disciple and Teacher, between Master and Servant. But Jesus shows that the logic of this world has no place at his table. "If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet," he says. "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

So Mary's outpouring of love flows on, washing over the disciples' feet, and then — whenever and wherever they are faithful to Christ's command — overflowing to flood the world with grace. And when this extravagant love flows freely, it begins to wash away the things the world considers important: either status that divides or calculus that defines worth. When this extravagant love flows freely, it washes the world with grace upon grace and draws us into relationship.

"Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another," Jesus says.

There is something about heeding Christ's commandment to wash one another's feet that draws us into relationships defined *not* by status, but by grace.

Like Judas and Peter, my tendency is to hold back from this exercise (though not, perhaps, for the same reasons). In my experience, including foot-washing into worship often feels like a forced ritual ... like we're resurrecting an ancient practice but leaving the symbolic significance in the tomb. Plus, it's just awkward. There's nothing like a good-ole-fashioned foot washing to make you feel self-conscious ... and that holds true whether you're on the giving or the receiving end.

But — every once in a while — grace flows through this practice just as freely as the water washing over a disciple's feet.

During my senior year of seminary, our community was invited to participate in a ritual of foot-washing during our Maundy Thursday service. And, of course, this room-full of future pastors submitted no matter how squeamish we felt about the practice. One by one, we walked barefoot to the front of the chapel to kneel at the feet of another and, then, to sit and allow the person next in line to do the same for us. When my turn came, I poured water over the feet of my best friend — a woman with whom I had laughed and cried and ranted and rejoiced. Anna and I are close, so washing her feet didn't feel particularly uncomfortable ... just a little strange.

And then I turned around to find my preaching professor kneeling before me. Here was a man some fifty years my senior, who had easily won the respect of every student on campus. He had spent his career in the parish

before coming to Austin Seminary so that a new generation of pastors could benefit from his wisdom. KC and I had a collegial relationship, but one defined — appropriately— by our roles as teacher and student. He imparted knowledge; I learned from his experience. I turned in papers; he handed out grades. But during that Maundy Thursday service, as KC poured water over my feet and dried them with a towel, that division washed away. For a moment, we were just two disciples trying to follow Christ’s commandment to pour ourselves out in service. And, much to my surprise, I found myself washed in God’s grace.

This is the kind of service to which Christ calls us. This is the kind of love to which Christ calls us. Not, explicitly, by pouring perfume or water upon another’s feet — though, we’ve seen how this expression of love can wash the world in grace. But through displays of abundance that defy the logic of this world — the logic that promotes and perpetuates division and measures worth by what we can count and consume. We are called to acts of generosity that draw people into relationship, blurring the lines between rich and poor, master and servant, those who give and those who receive. In short, blurring the lines between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

My former youth pastor tells a story of this kind of grace:

Ed was on a mission trip to Nicaragua — the kind of trip where, traditionally, we would assume the Americans to be the ones who give and the Nicaraguans the ones who receive. In other words — rich and poor. Service provider and service recipient. You get the picture. After all, you understand the logic of the world. But when their group reached the tiny mountain village of Plan Grande Dos, there was no such division among them. Boisterous children ran up to welcome them as the group piled out of the van. Adults from the village embraced the travelers they had come to know over years of partnering together in God’s work. As Ed describes it, “I was watching a family reunion between kinfolk who spend most of the year thousands of miles apart.”

And over the course of the week, Ed — who was the newbie in the group — was also embraced as kin. As he watched one of his Nicaraguan hosts make tortillas at her earthen oven, this woman invited Ed to join her in this work. Through hand gestures, and with lots of laughter, she guided him in making tortillas. And in that moment, the hand-made tortillas they shared became — by his account — a kind of communion. Through that simple but generous gesture, this woman poured out extravagant love that blurred the lines between rich and poor, service provider and service recipient. And Ed found himself washed in God’s grace.¹

You know about this kind of grace. I know, because you’ve shared similar stories with me. You need only replace “Nicaragua” with “Guatemala” or “Epiphany House” or “Family Promise” or “Stephen Ministry.” They are expressions of grace that defy the logic of this world because they wash away division, because they do not depend on what can be counted or consumed, because they overflow into other expressions of love. They are acts of self-giving that, when offered without any expectation of gratitude or like in return, become habits of the heart that continue to bless and nurture relationships that build God’s kingdom of grace.

This is the kind of service to which Christ calls us. This is the kind of love to which Christ calls us. And when we strive to follow this commandment, we will discover that Christ’s love flows in abundance and find that we, too, are washed in God’s grace.

¹ The Rev. Ed Zumwinkel, “Communion Tortillas,” *At the Water’s Edge: Laments, Prayers & Hopes for the Journey* – a Devotional Booklet compiled by the Committee on Local Arrangements for the 223rd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Gracious God, as our Lenten journey draws us closer to Jerusalem, and the final week in the life of Jesus, we know that those who conspire to do Jesus harm have made their intentions clear. Yet we marvel at Mary who does not collapse in fear, nor run from the danger that lurks in the shadows. She not only stays in place, she kneels and gently anoints the feet of her master.

Mighty God, we pray that we, too, may have the courage to kneel at the feet of Jesus – to listen to his word and to embrace his teachings. In a time when voices in our culture endorse lies, promote rancor and advocate strife, it requires courage to seek the truth, to practice forgiveness, to extend respect and to work for peace. May Mary's example fill us with courage and inspire us to fully embrace the way of Christ.

Comforting God, as we ponder Jesus in the home of his dear friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, one day before he would process into Jerusalem, the smell of death hung heavy in the air. Yet Mary found a beautiful way to hold death at bay by filling the room with the sweet fragrance of myrrh. Few options remained, but one way she could express her love for Jesus was to pour her precious ointment on his feet and wipe them with her hair. Days later when the agents of death pierced his feet to crucify him, did he remember Mary's gentle gesture? How can we best express our love for Christ?

Generous God, when we picture Mary pouring her costly myrrh on Jesus' feet, it is not difficult to imagine where she learned to give so generously. She had seen his compassion toward people who needed healing in body, in mind, and in spirit. She had seen his lavish love poured out on people who were poor, people who had fallen prey to temptation, and people who had been pushed to the margins of society. We pray that we may learn how to love *lavishly*, for this is the way your kingdom will spread on earth.

Eternal God, as we eat the Bread of Life and drink from the Cup of Salvation, we pray that Christ will live in our hearts, our minds and our souls, and that his love will radiantly shine through us.

Now, hear us as we unite our voices and pray together, saying,

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.