



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN  
CHURCH

**“Offensive Grace”**

**Scripture – John 12:1-8**

**Sermon Preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson**

**Sunday, March 13, 2016**

I remember the first time I visited the ‘Untouchable’ community. It was about one month into my year of service in South India, and my head was still reeling from the constant onslaught of the new – new sites, new sounds, new smells. But I was eager to meet the children I would be tutoring as part of my volunteer service and to develop a schedule for our English classes. So – after a long day of teaching at a school across town – I followed my Site Coordinator down the road to the ‘Untouchable’ community. It was only about a city block, but as we wove behind the town’s clinic and past the grove of coconut palms, we emerged onto a new landscape. We stood in a small village of concrete-block houses that had tarps shielding unfinished walls. These homes held minimal furniture and had no running water. And, the children who filled them went shoeless as they ran up and down the dirt road, kicking a deflated ball. This was the image of material poverty that many of us associate with the developing world, but I had not yet seen it in India.

During the weeks and months that followed, I went to the ‘Untouchable’ – or, to use the preferred term – the *Dalit* community two afternoons a week for tutoring. The children and I would gather on the steps of one of these concrete-block houses and work through their English homework. And, as I sat there, the mother of two of the students I tutored would bring me tea and sweets from a bakery down the road. This was common practice in South Indian homes – to greet guests with the best tea you’ll ever taste and hospitality that embraces even the most foreign stranger. But in this home, in this community where resources were scarce, such hospitality seemed so extravagant. To my Western eyes, this woman’s gift of tea and sweets was too much and receiving it made me feel a little uncomfortable.

Today’s story from the Gospel of John is about this kind of hospitality – the kind that makes us a little uncomfortable. Mary’s gift is so extravagant, so lavish, that it offends our sensibilities. I don’t know who else was at that dinner party in Bethany (I bet Judas was not the only disciple in the room), but I imagine most of the people there looked on in shock as Mary poured out a year’s wages worth of perfume. And, she doesn’t stop there. She goes on to wipe Jesus’ feet with her hair; it as an uninhibited act of devotion, a gift of her very self. It is intimate. It is sensual. It is extravagant. And, it makes us uncomfortable.

Judas is the one who names this ... **not** in so many words – he hides his disgust behind false concern for the ‘least of these.’ “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” he says. It’s a question many of us have wrestled with ourselves, particularly when budget conversations require us to make hard choices about allocating resources for ministry. But that is not really what Judas is getting at. He is trying to discredit Mary’s lavish gift – her effusive devotion – because it offends his sensibilities; it challenges

his understanding of discipleship. One scholar puts it well: “[Judas’ criticism] resembles a rigorous, unyielding piety that cannot stomach a wild love like Mary’s.”<sup>1</sup>

But Jesus silences this criticism and praises Mary’s wild love. In fact, he lifts her up as a model disciple – one who responds to Christ’s extravagant gift of grace by giving extravagantly.

You see, Mary cannot respond with anything less than wild love. Anything less would be inauthentic given all she has experienced ... Not long ago, Mary was kneeling at Jesus’ feet, crying: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (John 11:32). And, Jesus, so moved by her grief, went to Lazarus’ tomb and called Mary’s brother back to life. It was an extravagant gift – an act of wild love that would end up offending religious authorities and threatening the status quo. This gift of life, it turns out, would make onlookers so uncomfortable that they would begin plotting Jesus’ death. But, for Mary, it was an extravagant gift of grace that would inspire her own extravagance. So now, at that dinner party in Bethany, she kneels again at Jesus’ feet and pours out her gratitude in the form of expensive perfume.

It’s the kind of response Jesus desires from his disciples. In fact, it’s the response he commands.

A few days after that dinner party in Bethany, Jesus does for his disciples what Mary did for him. He kneels before Andrew, and Thomas, and Philip, and Judas and lovingly washes their feet. It is an extravagant gift of grace – an act of wild love that offends their sensibilities and challenges their understanding of discipleship. Peter is so uncomfortable that he raises his voice in protest: “[Lord] – You will never wash my feet!” (John 13:8). But Jesus insists. He pours out grace upon Peter, and Matthew, and James, and John, and commands them all to do the same. “If I ... have washed your feet,” Jesus says, “you also ought to wash one another’s feet” (John 13:14). Jesus commands his followers to kneel before others in service and to pour out the grace they have received. This is what it means to be a disciple: we who follow Christ are to respond as Mary did – by giving extravagantly.

And here is what amazes me most: this extravagant gift, this wild love, this grace that is so lavish that it makes us uncomfortable ... it multiplies. Just as Mary knelt before Christ, Christ knelt before his disciples, and his disciples must have knelt before countless others, sharing God’s grace through service to the world. Giving extravagantly is the only response to Christ’s extravagant gift; anything less would be inauthentic. You see, this is the nature of offensive grace – it propels us toward service, toward our own expressions of generosity. (That’s been my experience, at least.)

The afternoons I spent in the *Dalit* community are some of my fondest memories from India. Even after weeks of tutoring, the woman I mentioned earlier would greet me with an after-school snack as we gathered on the steps of her home. By then, such hospitality no longer made me uncomfortable. I came to cherish her offering of tea and sweets for what it was – a gift of grace generously poured out at the feet of a friend. But this gift – so extravagant in its simplicity – did transform me.

One day I was talking with my site coordinator about my experiences in the *Dalit* community. I spoke of the ways this community had embraced me – how I’d been overwhelmed by their hospitality. I expressed a desire to do more ... **not** because I wanted to ‘return the favor,’ but because I felt compelled to respond to this gift of grace. Anything less would have been inauthentic given all I had experienced. “Why don’t you start a library?” my Site Coordinator said.

“A library?” “Yes – so they will have resources to practice their English once you’ve gone.”

So we started a library. Not a full library ... nothing like the buildings packed with books we have on our street corners. But a library, nonetheless. We bought a bookshelf with some funds our volunteer group had pulled together. And I took the children I tutored to a shop to pick out some basic resources. And then I sent out a request

... I told my church back home about the ways this community had embraced me. They, too, were inspired by the extravagant grace I had experienced through relationship with these children and their families. So, before long, donations started pouring in: children's books and dictionaries and money to pay for shipping. My home church responded to this story of extravagant grace by giving extravagantly, and the library we had envisioned became a reality.

When I went back to India four years later, I visited my friends in the *Dalit* community. I gathered with some of the students I'd tutored on the steps of that concrete-block house, and I heard what they'd been up to for the past four years. One of these young women – the daughter of the woman who would bring me tea and sweets – was now a student at the college down the road. She had learned enough English – the language of higher education – to take her seat there. And, she was studying to be a teacher, so she could teach more children in her community.

You see – that's the thing about grace. It is extravagant, it is lavish, and sometimes it makes us uncomfortable. But it multiplies. Because once we have received this extravagant gift, we can only respond by pouring out our gratitude at the feet of another. Anything less would be inauthentic given all we have experienced. So, open your hands to receive God's extravagant grace. Let this wild love wash over you, even when it makes you uncomfortable. And then go and kneel at the feet of another!

<sup>1</sup>Matt Skinner, "Commentary on John 12:1-8," [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)

### **Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones**

Composer of creation and pulse of all life, we come to you with grateful hearts. As Mary did not hesitate to take from the shelf her most expensive jar of perfume to anoint the feet of your son, you lavish us with your love. Your extravagant gift begins with our very existence. After all, we might never have been. We might never have opened our eyes to the beauty of your world; might never have seen the innumerable shades of green that cover the earth, or the incomprehensible number of stars that decorate the night sky. We might never have tasted cool, fresh water, floated down a rushing river or bobbed like a large cork in the waves of the ocean. We might never have seen a perky batch of yellow jonquils, a stately lavender iris, or a lover's scarlet rose. We might never have been cheered by chirping finches, inspired by words of a wise teacher or moved by a piece of music that struck a chord within us. We might never have hiked up a mountain, run a race, swung a racket or ridden a bicycle. We might never have been held in the arms of a parent, experienced the delight of a close friendship, been brought to tears by an act of compassion or fallen in love. We might never have known the triumph of overcoming a mighty challenge, the relief of surviving a storm, or the hope that comes with faith.

Gracious God, we take far too much for granted. We routinely overlook the beauty that surrounds us, we miss chances to deepen our connection to others and we fail to speak words of gratitude for your bountiful gifts. Help us to be fully awake in each moment and glean the possibilities that emerge minute by minute. Help us to hear your whispers in the depths of our souls, urging us to live and to love with the generous spirit of Jesus.

When we encounter pain, make us instruments of healing.  
When we meet sadness, inspire us to extend sympathy.  
When we discover neglect, spur us to acts of kindness.  
When we spot deception, prompt us to speak the truth.  
When we come across racism, arouse us to show respect.  
When we witness inequity, propel us to strive for justice.  
When we detect selfishness, motivate us to work for the common good.  
When we face strife, guide us to the path of peace.

Life-giving Spirit, fill our hearts with compassion, our minds with wisdom, and our souls with hope, that we may embrace the adventure you call us to live and taste the joy of a life of faith.

Now, hear us as we pray the pray Jesus taught us to pray together, saying,

“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be they 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.