

**GOD IS CALLING US TO LIVE A RADICAL, EXTRAVAGANT LOVE FOR
GOD THAT KNOWS FEW BOUNDARIES.**

Fifth Sunday in Lent
April 6, 2025

God is calling each of us to live a radical, extravagant love for God that knows few boundaries.

Two weeks; two stories. The Prodigal Son last week, and Mary's costly vial of perfume this week. Both stories speak to the depth of love that is meant to be lived in the human/divine relationship; a love that is much more than merely cerebral and intellectual and doctrinal and ecclesial; but a love that is passionate and radical, and extravagant. I catch glimpses of this love now and then, sometimes hearing its siren call, beckoning me out into deep waters. But mostly I live a fairly ordinary life of faith in Jesus Christ, functioning as a husband, father, grandfather, minister, friend. But even in those ordinary days, I know deep down in my bones that a distant call is beckoning each of us; go farther in; come deeper.

Last week in the story of the Prodigal Son, we saw a Father who, despite his son's hatred for him, and betrayal and rebellion, still reached out in love to his son. And when the Father found his wayward son, he ran to him, embraced him, kissed him, put a ring on his finger and provided a celebration feast for him. This is the love that God has for each of us.

In today's story we see the human response to the Father's love in the story of Mary's extravagant gift to Jesus. Jesus had been invited as an honored dinner guest to the home of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. The meal was going to be extravagant, because Jesus was no ordinary guest. I can imagine the time these two women, Martha and Mary, must have spent getting ready for this celebration; talking back and forth over the guest list, debating what each one thought was Jesus' favorite food, discussing the right wines to pair with this food. Wrestling over the seating arrangement; where each of the men should be placed around the table based on their relationship to Jesus. Deciding what cold foods to serve, and which warm dishes, and how to make sure that the temperature of each dish was just right when the men were finally ready to eat.

As the two women busied their minds with this work, I believe that they were both aware of something else stirring in the back of their minds; something seemed to be subtly, almost imperceptibly at first growing in intensity, bubbling up within their souls. It was like some deep yearning longing to be born. This feeling was like a bitter-sweet dish within them; a mix of joy and elation along with a subtle hint of bitter sadness. At the time they did not know the meaning of this feeling. But it would soon be revealed to them.

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The dinner planning was finally complete. It was now two days until the feast. Martha and Mary went to the market and butcher to gather the supplies and set to work cutting and chopping and slicing and seasoning. As they worked in the kitchen, the fragrant aroma began to fill the house; an aroma of food; an aroma of celebration, tinged with sadness; an aroma of deep love.

The day finally arrived. Here's how the Gospel begins: "Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him." The guest list included men and women. The men would gather and eat together in the dining hall while the women would assist Martha and Mary in the kitchen, and eat there, as women were not allowed to recline at table with men. Martha and Mary gave various tasks to the other women.

Let's try and picture the scene that day. Jesus and one other guest, probably Lazarus, were reclining at one end of the low table. Various other men reclined around them. Stories were being told. There was laughter and playfulness. Somebody pulled a fast one on Peter that left everyone in stitches! Jesus was fully engaged in all the banter. But his mood seemed somewhat subdued. Something weighed on his mind

and soul. The women went about their tasks between kitchen and dining hall, each one dressed simply, their hair tied up culturally appropriate as they placed each course on the table for the men to enjoy, and quietly retreated.

At some point, in response to the calling of joy and sadness growing within her soul, Mary quietly slipped out of the kitchen by herself. She could no longer ignore the irresistible internal siren call of love. She had to act. With her heart pounding in her chest, feeling self-conscious and very exposed, she walked into the dining hall; not carrying the next dish to be served, but instead, carrying a very costly container of perfume; a radical and extravagant gift, a symbol of her love for her Lord.

This day would be symbolized by many fragrances; a variety of scents, each one speaking of Love, love for the guests, but especially love for the guest of honor, Jesus, their Lord; the fragrance of seasonings and simmering meat; but soon, pure Nard, a very expensive perfume indeed, would be added to the other fragrances in that house.

The gospel says: “Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with [Jesus]. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’s feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.” It was a very costly, radically extravagant demonstration of love.

Carrying a large beautifully ornamented vessel, Mary quietly, and shockingly to all the men present, moved near to the feet of Jesus and knelt on the floor. The conversation ended abruptly as each male face turned to stare at the woman remaining in the room with them.

Mary bore a smile of adoration on her face as tears gently ran down her cheeks. She appeared somewhat sad, and yet, somehow full of joy. There was a profound mystery etched on her face. Her next movement caused an audible gasp to be heard from the men. Mary moved her hands to the top of her head and slowly untied and unwound her hair, letting her dark thick hair fall about her shoulders. In Jewish culture, only harlots would carry their hair this way around strangers.

She now held every eye in the room in rapt attention. Then in one swift motion, Mary broke open the large jar allowing the strong sweet fragrance of pure Nard to flood the room. All the men around the table were stunned to silence. The other women had exited the kitchen and were peering in from the doorway, their mouths agape and eyes wide. Mary seemed to have gone mad! But only Jesus knew the source of her madness. She was mad with love, but not the kind of intimate erotic love known between a man and woman. No, this love was something different all together. This was a love that hid nothing, that held nothing back. It was a reckless, vulnerable, extravagant, radical kind of love.

Immediately Judas shouted out his protest “That perfume was worth a year’s wages. It should have been sold and the money given to the poor.” But Jesus, having seen the passionate love in Mary’s soul, responded to Judas and all who were there: “Leave her alone. She did this in preparation for my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.” The Passover was only six days away. The opposition to his ministry had been building. He knew intuitively that his remaining days on earth were short.

In that moment, only Mary saw it all clearly with the eyes of her soul. She saw Jesus’ pending death. She saw with absolute clarity who he was that reclined in front of her at the table. Jesus was so much more than an eloquent teacher and healer and prophet. She saw the brilliant light of God shining within him. It was this light, carried in simple human form that drew Mary lovingly and recklessly to him.

Mary’s kind of love for Jesus Christ was something special. But it was a love that is meant to be elicited from everyone who has been touched by the radical extravagant love of God.

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