"Extravagant Love"
John 12:1-11
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First Presbyterian Church of Spruce Pine
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This morning, as we continue our study of the Gospel of John, I want to step back for a moment, looking at the big picture as the story has unfolded. If you recall, in John's Gospel Jesus does a number of miraculous signs, all of them pointing to the truth about God's everlasting and abundant love. And Jesus as the Word made flesh - God with us - he is the key to understanding the Good News of God's amazing love. If you remember, we began our study looking at Jesus' first sign back in chapter 2 - the miracle at the wedding at Cana - when the host runs out of wine and with the prodding of his mother, Jesus changes ordinary water into barrels and barrels of the finest wine. A true miracle of abundance! And last week we encountered the last sign Jesus will do, the raising of Jesus' dear friend Lazarus from the dead. When Jesus is confronted with Martha and Mary's cries, *"Lord, if you only had been here our brother would not have died!"* Jesus weeps. He is deeply troubled and agitated. And he shows why he is indeed the Resurrection and the Life - the stone is rolled away and Lazarus is called forth to life. We watched this moving drama unfold on the video from last week, and in the closing verse we hear that many of those who witnessed this miracle come to believe in Jesus as God's Son, the Messiah.

It is here that we have reached a pivot point in the gospel. While some respond positively to Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, others are threatened by it. We are told that some of the religious leaders become filled with fear. "What are we going to do about Jesus? This man is performing many miraculous signs! If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him. Then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our people" (11.47b-48). Caiaphas, who was the high priest that year, reasoned that it would be better for Jesus to die rather than the whole nation be destroyed, and we are told that from that day on they plot to kill Jesus (11.49-53).

As the time of the Passover approaches, Jesus and his friends begin the journey towards Jerusalem. And it is in Bethany, a town just two miles outside of Jerusalem, that they land at a familiar place - the home of Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus. Let's pick up today's story at the beginning of chapter 12, as found in your bulletin *(Common English Bible)*:

> Six days before Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, home of Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Lazarus and his sisters hosted a dinner for him. Martha served and Lazarus was among those who joined him at the table. Then Mary took an extraordinary amount, almost three-quarters of a pound, of very expensive perfume made of pure nard. She anointed Jesus' feet with it, then wiped his feet dry with her hair. The house was filled with the aroma of the perfume. Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), complained, "This perfume was worth a year's wages! Why wasn't it sold and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief. He carried the money bag and would take what was in it.)Then Jesus said, "Leave her alone. This perfume was to be used in preparation for my burial, and this is how she has used it. You will always have the poor

among you, but you won't always have me."

Many Jews learned that he was there. They came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. The chief priests decided that they would kill Lazarus too. It was because of Lazarus that many of the Jews had deserted them and come to believe in Jesus.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Have you ever had an experience of abundance? A time when you received something in an over-the-top kinda way? I think as kids we may have those types of experiences around special days like birthdays and other holidays. I remember when our son Nicholas was old enough to experience his first Halloween - as we traveled door to door in our Atlanta neighborhood he seemed amazed that at each place there was more and more candy! All he had to do was go to the next house and receive whatever treat awaited him! One Christmas I remember opening the presents under the tree and being quite happy with everything I had received, and then all of a sudden I saw my dad wheeling out a bicycle for me that was not even on my list. The power and wonder surrounding that type of "over the top" abundance is hard to describe, and looking back on my experience it was not only about the stuff I received, but it was also about the love that was behind the gift.

Throughout John's Gospel we have seen moments of overflowing, extravagant abundance. When the wine runs out at the wedding, Jesus doesn't just provide what's needed - he provides barrels and barrels of the best wine, and everyone is amazed. When the crowd of 5,000 are tired and hungry at the end of the day, Jesus doesn't just meet their needs with a reasonably portioned meal or snack pack - no, he takes the 5 loaves and 2 fish offered by the boy and he multiplies them so that when everyone gets their fill, there are still 12 baskets of leftovers! These signs all point to the abundant love of God that Jesus embodies for us in the flesh - he is the Bread of Life, he is the Living Water that never runs dry - he is the Resurrection and the Life, offering life not only when people die and go to heaven but abundant life, here and now!

So when we turn to today's passage, Jesus is at the home of his beloved friends, the sisters Martha and Mary and their brother Lazarus. While Martha is noted as the one who is serving the dinner, Lazarus is immediately identified as the one "whom Jesus had raised from the dead" (12.1). Back in the day people did not sit on chairs around tables, but rather reclined on the floor - and so we get a picture of what abundant life looks like for the once dead man Lazarus. He is sharing fellowship with Jesus in a very intimate way, eating supper with close friends.

But the focus is not on the meal, or the abundance of food Martha may be serving - no, the focus rather is on sister Mary and what she does. She takes an extraordinary amount of very expensive perfume and pours it on Jesus' feet. The perfume was made of pure nard imported all the way from India - something reserved to anoint people of high honor (Karoline Lewis, John: Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries, p.166). She anoints Jesus' feet with it, then she wipes his feet dry with her hair. And the whole house is filled with the aroma of the perfume.

Now, why would Mary do this extravagant, over-the-top kind of thing to Jesus? Is it just to thank him for what he's done for their family, bringing Lazarus back to life? How could anything really adequately thank Jesus for that? But then an interesting thing happens in the story- Judas, one

the disciples who is at dinner with Jesus - he takes offense at what Mary has done. "What a wasteful thing to do! That perfume costs what a worker could make in almost one year - couldn't that be better spent on helping the poor!" Though the narrator gives us inside information, that Judas is the one who is about to betray Jesus and that he really doesn't care about the poor - I think Judas makes a legitimate point. Imagine if at the session meeting later today we approved spending tens of thousands of dollars on rose bushes for a new garden, extravagant robes for all the choirs, expensive seat cushions or something that you can envision as being wasteful. I could hear people saying, "Why not send the money to help the hungry through Neighbors Feeding Neighbors or Shepherd's Staff? Why not give the money to agencies helping the victims of war in Ukraine?" You see, although Judas is easily cast in the role of the villain, he does make a legitimate point. Our resources are to be used to serve those in the world who are hungry and thirsty, those who have no safe place to call home. And what Mary does seems really wasteful.

But as the story unfolds, Jesus tells us that there's more going on than meets the eye, and that Mary (not Judas) has chosen the better way. Coming to her defense Jesus says, "Leave her alone, Judas! It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me" (12.7-8). It will not be long before Jesus is arrested, tried and then sentenced to death - and like Lazarus, he too will be buried. Though this is the first time in the Gospel that Jesus' burial is mentioned, intuitive Mary seems to know already. Through her act of love Mary is acknowledging publicly that Jesus' hour is close at hand, and that he does not have much more time to spend with his closest friends.

Bible scholar Frances Taylor Gench notes that this story contains "one of the few smells on record in the New Testament" and in the place of the stench of death - the smell that came from her dead brother's body after 4 days in the tomb - Mary's radical act of devotion fills the house with a "fragrant smell and [importantly] grateful love (Gench, Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John, p. 95).

In her extravagant act of devotion, Mary is giving Jesus exactly what he needs. Love. Grateful love. Abundant love. As God in the flesh, Jesus knows what he faces in the days ahead. Remember, he's the Good Shepherd who will lay down his life willingly for his sheep. But as God in the flesh, Jesus is also fully human - remember, the tears of his beloved friends moved him to weep, too. Jesus knows what is coming before him in the days ahead - not only his physical death but the pain of betrayal by Judas, and the painful denial by Peter, too. But before facing these things in the days ahead, Jesus is given a gift of exquisite love - Mary pours out the perfume and with her hair she wipes Jesus feet just like Jesus will soon wipe his disciples feet.

Before Jesus teaches his disciples that they too must wash each other's feet (13.14) Mary washes Jesus feet. In this remarkable act Mary becomes the example of what true discipleship looks like - it's not in calculating the best use of funds to help the poor and needy, it's not in holding onto things that are valuable in the hopes that one day they will come in good use. No, being a disciple of Jesus sometimes means taking a risk and doing something that looks foolish. It's the pouring out of expensive perfume - it's humbling yourself to wash someone else's feet - it's doing whatever it takes to let someone know that they are truly loved.

Thinking about this story this week has reminded me of a friend of mine who is also named Mary. When I first met Mary I learned that she had worked in the restaurant business, and that based on her experience she wanted to help with the church's outreach program called Saturday Sanctuary. On Saturdays during the fall and winter months, we opened the doors of the Fellowship Hall to our neighbors in downtown Asheville, some of whom had slept outside in tents and others who were housed but were looking for a good hot lunch and fellowship. Mary soon got involved as the main kitchen volunteer, planning menus and organizing others to help prepare and serve. As the outreach program grew over the years, I was worried that Mary and the other volunteers would overextend themselves - that they would burn themselves out coming up with hot meals every week. I would say, "Mary, it's OK some weeks just to have soup and sandwiches and cookies on the side. The food is important but it's the relationships that develop at Saturday Sanctuary that are most important! You don't have to go overboard with the menu each week." Well, as much as I tried I did not have much success reigning in Mary's desire to provide an abundant meal each Saturday to those who lived on the margins. Whether it was serving a homemade pudding or a fresh fruit salad, Mary taught me how abundant love can best be expressed through acts of extravagant love and grace. Wine overflowing grace upon grace! Loaves and fishes multiplied over and over again - truly signs of God's abundant love!

What I finally learned through the efforts of church members like Mary and others is that for love to be real, it has to find a way to be expressed. If God places on your heart a love for those experiencing the brokenness of poverty, then that love can best be expressed in acts of extravagant love. Others may question the wisdom of your actions, but when actions are rooted in love they bear much fruit. Not only are bellies filled and bodies warmed, but transformation happens to those who seek to serve the "other." When we meet Jesus in the neighbor we are serving, our lives are transformed and we may never be the same again.

So in closing, I ask you to think about what it is that you are passionate about? What love has God placed on your heart that might lead you to do an extravagant thing? Is it becoming friends with the kid who is always sitting alone at lunch time? Not just talking to them but inviting them over to your house and eating cake and ice cream together?! Is it knitting socks to be given to the residents at Safe Place? And maybe not doing it alone, but inviting others to join you in a sock-athon! Is it making calls and sending cards to those who are in need of encouragement? Instead of store bought cards how about you decorate them yourself? In other words, how can your love for God and God's world be put into action in big and small ways? *I also want to challenge us as a congregation to think about how we can do the same thing.* What may God be calling us to do as a church to share Christ's love here in Mitchell County? Who is God calling us to be in a time when there are so many things that seek to divide us from one another? One of the three areas of focus this year is mission, and if you are interested there will be an initial mision meeting next week to begin this discussion together.

I am grateful for Mary's bold witness in this story. Though it might have been easy to hang back in the kitchen and help Martha with serving, Mary did the risky thing -she didn't ask permission of her siblings or the other disciples there. She probably didn't even tell Jesus what was coming. Instead, she led with her heart and poured out her love to her friend who was preparing for his final hour, the time Jesus would embrace death for the sake of the whole world.

To God be the glory, now and always. Amen.