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Carol J. Schlueter

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Pure Extravagance

Carol J. Schlueter

*Lecturer in New Testament Theology,
Waterloo Lutheran Seminary*

Text: Mark 14:1-9

Extravagance. That's what it was. Pure extravagance. The Oxford dictionary defines extravagance as "excessive", "immoderate", and "beyond the bounds of reason".

The extravagance of the situation is apparent in the fact that none of this should have happened. It went against all the norms of propriety, against all the bounds of reason.

She interrupted a dinner party. Women in the first century did not go about barging into private dinner parties in order to communicate with men any more than they do today. She was a nameless, uninvited, unknown woman, who was out of place.

Then, as now, it was appropriate to interrupt a dinner party because of an emergency, or because someone important had a message for Jesus, but this was not an emergency and she was not a person of renown. Besides, she interrupted in order to communicate a personal message.

Now if one must communicate a message to a guest at a dinner party one seeks the most unobtrusive method possible—slipping the guest a note, or whispering the message or relaying the message through one of the other guests. The woman in question did none of these things. Her actions spoke volumes. Think of the audacity of her act. According to Mark she walks up to Jesus as he reclined at table. She bends down, her alabaster flask in her hands, she breaks the seal on it, and, using her hands to guide the oil she pours it on his head. Such a personal act by an uninvited woman does not belong in the midst of a dinner party.

Now if her actions spoke volumes, the fragrance did so even more. Most of the Gospels actually record the fact that the house was filled with the fragrance. Think of the effect! Long after she left the house, the statement that she made still hung in the air. The message of her act could not have been more pervasive had she shouted out her love for Jesus.

And her actions caused such discomfort on the part of the disciples that they could only grumble about the price of the oil. It is not considered appropriate for one to antagonize the guests at a dinner. And they did have a point. The gift was indeed much too expensive. The price of the oil was more than 60 Canadian dollars. A more moderate expression would have sufficed. But extravagance is not limited to the woman in question. Jesus begins to participate in it as well.

Jesus' reply just shouldn't have happened. The woman should have been chastised; Jesus might have said, "I really cannot accept this gift. Why don't you sell it and give the money to the poor?" Instead he told the others who murmured against her, "Leave her alone."

Or he might have said, "I'm sorry, I can't see you right now, why don't we make an appointment for tomorrow?" Or he might have moved away from her, out of the reach of her touch. Instead, he said to everyone there, "She has done a beautiful thing for me. She is preparing my body for the burial."

And whereas he might have simply said, "Thank you", instead he said, "Wherever the gospel is preached, this story will be told in memory of her." An act—out of place and excessive, and a woman—nameless, uninvited, and unknown, are suddenly part of the sacred story to be remembered forever.

The act and the woman communicate the nature of God. For extravagant love is the essence of the gospel. Remember how God rescued Noah and his family from the waters of the flood? Remember the exodus from Egypt when God listened to the cries of a small group of oppressed people and liberated them? Remember when all the Hebrew baby boys were being killed to comply with the decree from the pharaoh of Egypt? God saved the baby Moses through a princess, a princess who defied her father's decree and put her own life on the line by drawing the baby out of the water to save him!

These are the acts of a God who loves extravagantly, a God who chose the smallest and most insignificant people of the

Mediterranean for a covenant people. And more than this, Deuteronomy tells us that Israel was the “apple of God’s eye”. God was as delighted with Israel “as an eagle that stirs up her nest, that flutters over her young, spreading out her wings, catching them, and bearing them on her pinions.” God made Israel “to ride on the high places of the earth and made the people suck honey out of rock and oil out of flinty rock” (Deuteronomy 32:10–13). Extravagant language to describe an extravagant God!

Paul of Tarsus came face to face with God’s inclination to break through the expectations of what “should be”, when he relinquished his expectation of a triumphant, political, Messiah in the face of his experience of a crucified man as the Messiah. He articulated this radical change best perhaps in 1 Corinthians 1 where he says that Christ crucified is a stumbling block to some and folly to others, that is, it was an act out of place, beyond the bounds of reason.

But Paul’s experience of the risen Christ revealed the extravagance of God’s act, and Paul says that while it appears to be a stumbling block, it is really the power and wisdom of God. In other words, that is precisely the way God acts! God’s disregard for propriety and inclination for extravagance leaps out at us in the story of Jewish Christians at Antioch who began by thinking that they should never have table fellowship with Gentiles, and ended up by eating with them as co-partners in Christ.

And when Rosa Parks, who knew that propriety dictated that when riding the bus blacks ought to give up their seats for whites, went beyond what culture said was reasonable and said no, again the wall of “what should have happened” cracked, and God’s extravagant love peeked through.

The story of the woman who anointed Jesus at Bethany is part of the larger passion story. It is couched between the plans of the religious authorities to kill Jesus and the cross. Located there, it foreshadows the extravagant love of Jesus for the world in giving up his life for it. That too should never have happened.

Jesus had healed the sick and raised the dead. He ate with the outcast and despised of society. Sometimes he ate with the rich and the religious authorities. Oh he argued with the religious leaders of the day, but that was expected of a bright

Jewish man. He had disciples and a large public following. A successful career was expected. Hadn't the people lined the streets and cried out: "Hosanna, hosanna in the highest"? And, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord"?

He could have called on the armies of angels at his disposal to vindicate himself. He could have called on the armies of men ready to rid Judea from the Roman occupation, but he didn't. Instead, he made humanity the "apple of his eye". God incarnate chose the way of the cross, gave up legitimate power and success and poured out his blood for humanity, for you and me: the extravagant act of love par excellence.

Profound love.

But the crucial question is, "How shall we receive such an extravagant gift?" Jesus, indeed, God incarnate, at Bethany reveals the way—the way of acceptance with joy and wonder when he said to the woman and to all in the house, "She has done a beautiful thing for me!"

Oh that we too could cast aside the bonds of propriety which keep us at arm's length from embracing the extravagant love of God and declare: "Jesus has done a beautiful thing for us!"¹

Notes

¹ When the sermon was preached, the preacher concluded by soaking cotton swabs in fragrant oil; these were passed from worshipper to worshipper to make the sign of the cross on each other's foreheads while saying, "Jesus has done a beautiful thing for us".