



March 21st 2010
5th Lent Year C John 12. 1-8

A friend of mine plays the piano at the Chemainus Theater – he plays in the dining hall to entertain people while they are eating and often he’s just background music and not really noticed. In December last year an older woman dropped a loony into the tip jar and said rather grandly “This is for your Christmas holidays!” My friend is polite so he smiled and nodded his thanks although something along the lines of “Big deal” may have passed through his thoughts because a loony wouldn’t buy him a coffee.

Later on after work he realized that the loony wasn’t a loony after all but instead was a very rich gift – a gold coin – a valuable gold coin which when he sold it was worth \$500 and it really did give him a holiday! He was touched by the kindness of this woman who simply disappeared into the crowd and by the fact that she was not only generous but extravagantly so – and he was just the piano player.

Today the gospel is about extravagance – about gifts and about generosity beyond all measure. The gospel story happens at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. We are told that it was after Lazarus had been recently been raised from the dead by Jesus and the story takes place at a special dinner in Jesus’ honour. The story goes that Jesus is relaxing after dinner and that Mary takes about a half liter of perfume and that she pours it over Jesus’ feet and washes them and then that she wipes them with her hair.

This was a gift of hospitality and a great compliment but it is would have shocked the people there. This was a very intimate act and also an act of great humility - and it was something that broke the rules of how men and women relate to each other it was excessive in every way.

And were told that the smell of the perfume filled every corner of the house and filling up the senses. This was an exotic





perfume one of the ingredients that went into the blend of incense used in the Temple and it was expensive. We are told that it was estimated at the value of 300 denarii, which are small silver coins and if you're a bit rusty on the exchange value of the denarius it was about what you'd get if you worked in a farmer's field all day – this is about a year's wages we're talking about a pretty big chunk of change.

When we put it in these terms we might be inclined to raise an eyebrow at the extravagance. Rich gifts may make us uncomfortable to start with – we tend to be a bit suspicious about them – there must be a catch to it all – the giver must want something from us and the bigger the gift, the more they want. There is the saying, after all, that we “shouldn't take a gift we're not prepared to pay for”.

And besides all that, we tend to scale our gifts accordingly don't we? It's all a fine balance of what we can afford and who the person it and what the occasion is and our relationship to the person – as well as the unwritten rule that if I give you a gift one will come back to you in proportion to what is given.

And so Mary pours a small fortune over the feet of Jesus and the house is filled with the smell of the perfume. Now whatever the other disciples think of it all we have Judas who makes the objection and all he can smell is the smell of money – and money being wasted.

Why can't this money have been given to the poor? he objects and Jesus silences him – the poor will always be with you. She is preparing me for burial – I will not be with you always. Jesus accepts the offering. Jesus knows that this gift is from Mary's heart – it's a gift of love it's a pure gift – no strings attached no hidden motive behind it. It's a gift that is lavish and over the top and full-hearted.

You see, Mary is a good disciple. Mary has been with Jesus long enough to see the type of love Jesus has for other people –





how he gives to other people whole-heartedly and generously. Mary's actions – are simply reflecting back to Jesus everything that he has taught her. If we take the story a step further we see in Jesus that the type of love he shows others is the type of love that God has for us. It is love that doesn't make sense it's heaped out in great servings a love that isn't carefully weighed or proportioned according to the person or the occasion but love that is irrational, over the top like the love of the Father of the prodigal son we heard about last week.

And the gospel asks us if we can learn to be as good a disciple as Mary who has watched Jesus and listened to Jesus and who has got the point of what the love of God is all about – or whether we look critically on and sniff in a self-righteous way.

This gospel asks us personally if we can really believe that God really does love us that much and not be suspicious of such love and if we can learn to treat others with that same generosity of heart. To achieve that level of belief will be what the Roman Catholic priest Henri Nouwen calls “Our greatest spiritual challenge”.

I'm leaving the last word to a widow called Marjory Kempe who lived in Lynn, Massachusetts in 1667. Kempe tells the story that Jesus spoke to her once with a message - a message that I believe was for her and for everybody – he said these words. “More pleasing to me than all your prayers, [more pleasing to me than all your] works and [all your] penances is that you would believe [that] I love you.”

Amen.

Rev. David Peterson

