

Passion  
Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent  
March 21, 2010 – The Rev. Torrence Harman  
Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Phil. 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

Last Sunday we took a parable that had been known for hundreds of years as “The Prodigal Son” and we gave it a new name, “The Prodigal Father.” We turned the word “prodigal” upside down. We used its definition “recklessly extravagant” and rather than view this term through a negative lens, we gave it a positive twist. Rather than focusing on the reckless extravagant **waste** of the younger son, we focused on the reckless, extravagant **love** of the father.

Today, we have another story about lavish love. Extravagant love, expressed recklessly – passionately.

Am I the only one who feels a little uncomfortable with what Mary does in the scene that confronts us today in the Gospel?

Jesus is at Lazarus’ home. Lazarus, recently raised from the dead, is at the dinner table with Jesus. Perhaps others were with them. Perhaps it was a celebration: that Lazarus lived. Martha serves the meal – of course. Mary, her sister, takes a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard and washes Jesus’ feet. It is a lavish act and extravagant.

Granted Jesus had earlier raised her brother Lazarus from the dead. Why not lavish attention on someone who had done so much for her family? But how she did it – not just lavishly, extravagantly but passionately – doesn’t that give us pause?

What did Mary do? She took a costly perfume, instead of a bowl of water from the well, to wash Jesus’ feet. The well water was free. The perfume, the nard, was costly. The story tells us that this perfume was worth three hundred denarii.

Three hundred denarii was, in those days, equivalent to a year’s wages. So, in today’s terms we are talking about a lot of money. At \$12 an hour, a low wage, we’re talking about \$25,000. At a more middle class wage, we could be talking about \$35,000, \$45,000, \$65,000 or more. Mary took a sum equal to a year’s worth of wages and bathed Jesus’ feet with that. It was an extraordinary act, truly extravagant. Just think what else that sum could do. How, on earth, can she justify what she did? How, on earth can we condone what she did? Isn’t she squandering resources?

And then Mary does something else extraordinary, reckless. She lets down her hair. She takes Jesus’ now perfumed feet in her hands, takes her hair and wipes his feet. “So what?” you might think. How could anything she now does even compare with “wasting” the huge sum of money she has already poured out.

What Mary does is scandalous in the society in which she lived. A woman letting down her hair was an intensely intimate act – saved only for her husband. A woman touching a man was also scandalous. And it had sexual, sensual overtones. What she did (forget the money she

wasted) was amazingly “taboo” in that society. But however we interpret what she did, it was an act of love.

Mary defied convention. She expressed her love, her passion for her Lord in a way that would have shocked onlookers. What on earth did good sensible sister Martha think of Mary’s actions? What did her brother, Lazarus, think of her actions? What did others around the table think of her actions? We know Judas was only worried about Mary wasting the money, but others had to have been astounded by Mary’s radical, scandalous, passionate expression of love.

But her actions are also symbolic. In her act of anointing Christ’s feet she is anointing her king, saying, in effect, “You are my king; I follow.” Her act also will in hindsight be seen as foreshadowing Christ’s death – a symbol of the anointing of his whole body after crucifixion. The fragrance of death is in the room. Mary act foreshadows what’s to come. She sees, in advance, where the story is going and just how radical and passionate Jesus’ love is for her, for others and for the world he was sent to save.

There’s yet another story to come about a scandalous expression of love. We will consider it on Maundy Thursday when, in an upper room, Jesus will take off his outer robes, place a towel on his arm, kneel in front of his disciples, take their dirty, dusty feet in his hands, one by one and wash them. Peter will recoil from this. He will protest. It’s not what a leader does. It’s not appropriate. It’s not what a master does. Jesus, the master, will defy all convention and wash the feet of his disciples, turning upside down the then contemporary ideas of master/servant, leader/follower. It will be an intimate act that will make us nervous as we consider it on Maundy Thursday, just like it made Peter really nervous two thousand years ago.

I know it is an intensely uncomfortable act. In about ten days I will kneel with a basin of water and a towel, ready to wash your feet. And if this year is like the past couple, almost no one will come forward. I understand. It’s an act that makes you feel embarrassed, the act I will offer, as Jesus commanded. One that makes you uncomfortable. There’s some sense that it is inappropriate, taboo, so extremely unconventional. But it’s an act that Jesus commands of his disciples: to do likewise to one another. He seems to be talking about washing feet; but he’s really simply, profoundly saying, “Serve one another; love one another.”

Passion. It’s time in our journey through Lent to confront that word. Today’s Gospel story is not just about lavish, extravagant love, it’s about Passion, Christ’s passion for us and for a changed world.

The day after this dinner party at Lazarus’ home, Jesus will enter Jerusalem as a king sitting on a donkey’s colt. Then the second half of the Gospel of John will take us through Holy Week: a farewell meal in an upper room, an arrest, a trial, a crucifixion, a burial and a resurrection. The second half of the Gospel of John is known as The Book of the Passion.

It’s a story that shows what Christ is passionate about, what he is willing to give his all, even his life for: us and a new world. He gave his all that we might have new life.

It’s a new life that is costly, also, for us as disciples. It will be a life that asks us to do the unconventional. A life that asks us to risk and even turn our backs on old images, previous ways of living according to worldly expectations. And even be passionate about it.

Mary is one example of this for us this morning. Paul is another, an upstanding Jew, highly regarded in his community. He has been turned around by Christ. Any gains he had before, he counts as loss. He has suffered the loss of all things, but regards them now as rubbish. Listen to his powerful, passionate words:

**“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. . . . I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me his own.”**

Two powerful, passionate disciples. Mary and Paul. May we have the courage and the passion to follow in their footsteps as they followed in Christ’s.

Press on – because you are extravagantly loved. Press on – because you are called to do likewise. Press on – to love.

Hear Paul’s final words today:

**“But this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”**

Hear God’s call: Press on.