



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

February 10, 2019

"A Broken Alabaster Jar" - Hope Restored Sermon Series

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Imagine this with me.

Picture a dark stage with a single spotlight on a wooden chest. Jesus is in heaven. He has lived His 33 years of life on earth. And one day He walks to that chest. It's a chest of memories of His time on earth.

He stares at it pensively. Suddenly, He slowly kneels down and opens the lid and peers in. Slowly, He pulls out some of His favorite objects to look at them once again.

First, He retrieves...

...a piece of soiled, pus-and-blood-stained cloth from a robe of a leper.

It reminds Him of that day He healed ten lepers at one time. All of their lives they suffered from that horrible disease that covered them with sores and made them lose feeling in their body. But then He healed them. All ten of them ran off so happy for they were healed, but then one, and only one, suddenly came back and fell at His feet to say thank you. And He was a Samaritan, a disliked group of people who normally did not like Jews like Jesus. That made it more remarkable.

That piece of cloth was from that Samaritan leper who lavishly thanked Jesus. And a tear forms in the eye of Jesus as He thinks about that day.

...Then He picks up two copper coins given by a widow, in the Temple Treasury. It was all she had.

Jesus remembered that day when He and His disciples saw that and He said that woman gave more than anyone else that day to God, his Heavenly Father. Jesus smiled.

...He looks farther in His treasured chest and He gently picks up a sycamore tree leaf of a tree that a man named Zacchaeus was hiding in.

You know the story. "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much."

...a 3-foot vine staff—symbol of a Roman centurion—who had a paralyzed servant suffering greatly and who had asked for healing.

Jesus asked, "Shall I come and heal him?" "No. No need. I

am a man of authority. Just say the word." Jesus said in response "I have not seen such faith in all of Israel!" He said that to a Gentile, which made it even more surprising.

...And then He sees in the corner of the chest a small, tiny piece of a broken alabaster jar.

Jesus closes His eyes, thinks back, way back, to this event and about that alabaster jar that I shall now read about and how it happened just the week before He was crucified.

Mark 14:1-9 It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill Him; for they said, "Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people."

While Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as He sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard (perfume), and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. But some were there who said to one another in anger, "Why was the ointment wasted in this way?"

For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor." And they scolded her.

But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial.

Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

So let's examine this story that is so important that Jesus said where ever the gospel is told, this story will be proclaimed! And indeed, we are doing that today in this country and at this time.

Let's look at all of the important aspects of this story. If we compare this story with the one in the 12th chapter of the Gospel of John (which adds more detail) we learn several things:

First, the woman in the story is actually Mary of Bethany, who is the sister of Lazarus who was raised from the dead. Mary was the one who loved to sit at the feet of Jesus to listen to His teaching while her sister Martha was bustling in the kitchen.

Second, Simon the Leper is probably Lazarus' father or his brother.

Think on this: This is a very ill family. You have a leper named Simon and a sick guy named Lazarus who died but then Jesus raised him from the dead.

Simon probably was a leper. I mean, why else would they call him Simon the Leper? And he probably got healed for I can't imagine they would eat with an active leper and would probably quarantine him if he did have leprosy rather than have him at the dinner table.

Man, that's the kind of party I would want to go to. You have a dead guy who is now alive? How cool is that?! You have a leper who was healed. What great dinner conversation! So what was that like, Lazarus, being bound and dead for a bit and put in a tomb? A bit claustrophobic? And so how did it feel to be dead and then wake up again still bound in burial clothes? Did you kinda hop out? How did that work?

The third thing we look at in our passage is the feet washing. It was normal back then to wash the feet of your guests before a dinner. They have walked for miles to get to your place. They are uber dirty—for there was no Uber—their feet are grimy, grungy, smelly, so the ointment and its fragrance would not only make the feet feel softer and smell good, but it would make the entire room smell good.

But then the fourth thing is that, when Mary anoints Jesus feet, she breaks open an alabaster jar containing not a cheap Aveeno or CVS ointment but rather a perfume that costs a

whole year's salary! Did you hear that? A whole year's salary. That's way over the top!

And to make it even more extravagant, she doesn't only pour the oil on Jesus' head and hair—it was the original Head and Shoulders shampoo—but in the John 12 account, we learn it's also His feet. Then she wipes the feet not with some dirty house rag, but she uses her *own hair* to wipe His feet.

This makes it even more over the top.

So much so that we learn from the Gospel of John's account that it is Judas Iscariot himself, the man who betrays Jesus, who is the one who complains in our passage that this is such a waste and that the perfume could have been sold and the monies could have been given to the poor.

Yes, that would have been useful. Very useful. So practical. So Star Trek Spock like.

The orator-evangelist-revivalist Jonathan Edwards in his sermon *Mary's Remarkable Act* that he preached two hundred years ago said that her act was "useless." Useless in the sense that Jesus didn't need that. And useless that Mary didn't need to do that to get Jesus to do things for her for He had already healed Lazarus and brought him back from the dead. What more could He do for her?

I like what Tim Keller says, that Judas, who complained that Mary showering Jesus with all of that perfume, was wrong.

Judas was always trying to get things *from* Jesus, while Mary was trying to *get Jesus* Himself, more of Him, more like Him.

As I mentioned last week, we must not have a transactional relationship with Jesus where, if we do certain things, then He will do things for us. A tit for tat.

Rather, we should just love Jesus and know that He loves us no matter what we do, like a good parent who loves His child no matter what He does, no matter if He is naughty or nice.

Keller says that there should come a time when we can see Jesus and fully experience what He has done and see Him not as of utility but of beauty. (King's Cross: The Gospel of Mark, Part 2: The Journey to the Cross—January 28, 2007)

Beauty. Great word. Beauty is important, especially for a younger generation to understand Jesus. Maybe Mary was a young adult.

There is a theory among sociologists that different generations look at life and faith in different ways as they try to decide what to do or if they will become a Christian.

For the Boomers (54-74 years old), their question is **"What is truth?"** They want to hear more about doctrine or have apologetics to debate and come to truth. Is the Bible true? Is Jesus true?

Gen X (39-53 years old) asks **"What is authentic?"** Tired of fake, slick. Want genuineness?

Are Christians really genuine or fake?

Gen Y (24-38 years old) asks **"What is good?"** (Justice). Is Jesus really about helping the poor. Are Christians keeping to themselves or really going out to help the community.

And then very interesting, when it comes to Gen Z, those 7-24 years old, this is their question: **"What is beautiful?"** Things like healing (experiencing something beautiful), art, aesthetics, excellence (doesn't mean perfection) are meaningful.

Keller points out that Harvard's Elaine Scarry wrote a book called *On Beauty and Being Just*. She wrote "Beauty somehow moves us toward justice and generosity. Beauty stops us, transfixes us, takes the individual away from the center of his or her *preoccupation with self* and prompts a distribution of attention toward others."

Did you hear that? Beauty takes us away from a preoccupation with self and moves us toward attention towards others!

For Mary of Bethany, she saw beauty in Jesus and this was indeed quite an outrageous, lavish, extremely generous, extravagant, excessive, exorbitant, elaborate, effusive move that showed her love for Jesus.

So when Jesus saw that broken piece of alabaster jar – a tear ran down His cheek.

So now we're coming home to the challenge question to you and to me.

I told you in my opening imagined story that Jesus was looking at some pieces in His chest of memories that reminded Him of people in the Bible whose acts pleased Him.

Here's the challenge question: If Jesus were to open up His treasured chest of memories, what contemporary mementos would he find of you and me that would remind Him of *our* extravagant, excessive, effusive love for Him?

Maybe He would look in and see a motorcycle key, that reminded him of Ted who sold his \$80-thousand motorcycle and gave the proceeds to First Prez so that this campus could be bought that thousands of people could come to know Jesus.

Maybe the Lord would look in his memory box and see a worn, yellowed Punahou tuition bill, and Jesus would smile as he would think of Rick and Denice who pulled their kids out of Punahou and used much of that saved tuition money to pay for this building so that people like you and me could have a place and parking to hear the gospel and experience His love.

Wow! You may be thinking that is like way too excessive! That is way too extravagant, exorbitant, why that's like—oh my—like Mary of Bethany.

But we shouldn't look down on that because we stand on the shoulders of others who came before us. We are here today because of people showing their extravagant love for Jesus from which we happen to benefit.

This is our 60th anniversary come Feb. 15! We stand on their shoulders—the foundation that they built for us!

But the quantity of money doesn't matter as much as the heart for we know that from the widow who gave just two copper coins. That was extravagant for her as that is all she had.

Maybe Jesus looks in His treasure chest and sees the soda-can-pull-tabs that reminds him of the Worthington kids who went around the neighborhood to get empty soda cans to recycle and turn in for the 5 cent deposit so that they could contribute all the coins collected to the building fund to get this place with no allowance for themselves.

Extravagant expressions of love. But it's not about money.

Maybe Jesus looks into that chest and sees a First Prez Parking Attendant Vest and he thinks of people like Mark and Stacia Peleholani and Ross and Jan Kutsunai who have spent the time—not days, not months, but years—yes, more than ten years running the parking lot ministry so that people could find space and park in orderly fashion, even when no one else would help lead. It allowed people to get to Jesus. And we still need help today.

So when Jesus opens up that chest someday, what will He find that will remind Him of you, that will make Him smile or maybe even have a tear in His eye?

And if there is something there in that chest, it will not be

because we felt we had to or out of guilt we did something. A gift whether Valentine's or Christmas that we felt obligated or guilt-ridden to give loses its meaning.

For Jesus it's not something that would be transactional, that if I do this big sacrifice, then maybe God would really love me or bless me more. No there is nothing you could do that would make Jesus love you more. For He already gave His life for you and suffered for you. He already extravagantly gave His life and love for you when you had not done anything.

That is what love is. You are that precious to Him.

When the Bible says God is love, we can think that the subject is love and that love is like a god. We should cherish love and all of its emotion. We can say it is Love that will guide us.

No, the sentence is that God ... God is love. He is the main subject. The essence of God is love. The fullness of love is in a personal God who loves us so extravagantly, so excessively, so elaborately that He gave His life for us after being tortured and crucified on a cross. Nothing we could do would fully repay Him for that.

Lastly, when we hear about the extravagant love of Mary of Bethany that is shown in her breaking the flask and pouring the incredible oil on Jesus feet and wiping his feet with her hair, we can think she is one wacky wahine.

In fact, we can fear the word extravagant. We don't think it is right to be extravagant. That can bring a lot of anxiety to us, to be extravagant.

But while we may fear that being extravagant towards Jesus is scary, we don't mind being extravagant in other areas of our lives. Some people pay a lot of money for a dinner and show. I have friends who are not millionaires who flew in from California to see the Bruno Mars concert. That's extravagant.

Locally, we can go to Blue Note and after the tickets for the family and the food you are probably over \$500. That is extravagant.

But when it comes to our faith, we wonder what it means. It really boils down to worship. Will we go all out in worshipping God with our time, talent and treasure?

Maybe sometimes we don't think we have to be extravagant because Jesus doesn't need to be thanked effusively. He has everything He needs. He is super rich, so to speak. But the point of the story is that He is moved by such acts.

Personally, if my kids said, "We don't need to thank Dad because he has so much more than we do. We don't need to recognize his birthday or get him a Christmas gift because he has it all, and he paid for our upbringing, our food, our clothing, our education, and prayed for us for jobs. We don't need to thank Him even though he was a main provider of our life."

Honestly, I would be super disappointed if they didn't say thank you or recognize my birthday or Christmas.

I wonder if we aren't extravagant in our expressions of love for God because we think He doesn't need it. But we know from this passage that Jesus is so moved when such things happen that He said everyone will talk about this for millennia to come.

Sometimes to lavishly thank Jesus can scare us because we might lose control being that emotional. To be extravagant means we give up some control. In worship, I am not saying you have to hold your hands up or sing loudly, but I ask us how do we lavishly praise God in worship?

I believe it comes out of thankfulness. If we had a best friend who gave his or her life for us, we would hopefully be lavish in our gratitude. If that person died giving up his or her life for us, we might say, "I will do anything to support their loved ones—their kids or spouse—because of what they did for me. I will spend lavishly to show my appreciation."

So what do I think God appreciates from us? It is when—and He told us in the Bible—it is when we love God with our heart, soul and mind. We can say no, not my intellect. Yes, that. Not my emotions, my heart. Yes, that. Give that up to God. Express that love. We can say no, not my soul. Yes, the very guts of you. Love God with all of your heart, soul and mind.

May we live lives of just loving God with all of our heart and soul and mind. And that, in and of itself, is extravagant.



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Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org
The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: fpchkoolau@gmail.com