

“Lenten Moments in Matthew’s Gospel: 4) The Extravagance of Jesus”

a sermon by

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Text: “But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, ‘Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me’” (Matthew 26:10).

Anyone who is familiar with the Gospels understands that it is impossible to read them apart from encountering what some have called the “difficult sayings of Jesus.” I was reminded of that on Wednesday when Katie Crowe preached on the parable of “The Laborers in the Vineyard” (Matthew 20: 1-16), that strange story where Jesus tells of a householder who paid the same wages to the laborers who had worked all day as he did to those who had only worked for an hour.

But it is certainly not the only “difficult saying of Jesus.” There is the one in which Jesus said that, “it would more difficult for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:24). Then there is that occasion when Jesus called a man to follow him. When the man protested that he had to first bury his father, Jesus replied by saying, “Let the dead bury the dead.” It was this same Jesus, who when confronted with members of his own family, responded by saying, “Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and Mother” (Mark 3:35).

I.

This story of the anointing of Jesus at the house of Simon the Leper contains one of the most difficult sayings of Jesus. It occurs in the Passion narratives of Matthew's gospel, sandwiched between the perfidy of the religious leaders to kill Jesus (Matthew 26:1-5) and the decision of Judas to betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver (Matthew 26: 24-26). It is, as one commentator has observed, "a ray of light in the midst of a great darkness."

It is a story that occurs in all of the gospels (Mark 14:10-11 Luke 7:36ff; John 12:3ff.), although the Gospel writers do not agree on all the details. They all do agree, however, on the basics. In Matthew's gospel the place of the anointing is in the town of Bethany at the house of man by the name of Simon the leper. An unnamed woman approaches Jesus with a costly ointment, which she pours on his head, apparently in anticipation of his death and burial.

The disciples of Jesus were outraged. Why would Jesus allow such a thing? Did he not know that this ointment could have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor?

Most of us, I believe, can identify with the disciples. After all, how does one justify such extravagance in a world in which there is so much hunger and human suffering? This past week the *New York Times* reported on the ministry of Joel Osteen, author of the popular book *The Life You Have Always Wanted*. Osteen preaches unashamedly the "gospel of wealth." He will have the chance to practice what he preaches, having signed a new book contract for \$10 million dollars. Osteen believes that Christians settle for too little. He thinks we are like a passenger on a cruise ship eating cheese and crackers, when there is a fabulous buffet that God placed before us. He wants Christians to enjoy the abundance that God places before us.

And yet, I suspect, that most of us would be at least a little skeptical of that. Somehow it does not quite fit the picture of Jesus in the New Testament, eating with outcasts and sinners, healing the blind, lame, and deaf, touching lepers thereby taking their uncleanness on himself, observing to his disciples that "foxes have dens, the birds of the air have nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head."

The startling thing, of course, is that Jesus did not condemn the woman. On the contrary, he condemned his disciples for their pragmatism. Jesus saw something in her that was as rare then as it is today, extravagant love given with no thought of return.

II.

One of the subjects that has interested me in recent years is the relationship between the Christian faith and the arts, particularly the visual arts and music.

Within the Reformed faith there has always been a certain tension between our faith and the arts. John Calvin, the great reformer and founder of the Reformed faith, was distrustful of art. He had seen the terrible excesses of the medieval church with its ornate churches, statues, jewels, and relics. Calvin ordered the churches under his authority to be stripped of these excesses and wanted nothing to interfere with the preaching of the Word and purity of Worship. He was also

concerned as well that Christians demonstrate lifestyles consistent with the Gospel of Christ. “If the rich live extravagantly,” Calvin argued, “the poor will go hungry.” That was particularly true in a city like Geneva, Switzerland, that was filled with refugees from the religious wars of the Sixteenth Century.

Yet, Calvin was not blind to the beauty of God’s creation. He marveled at the scientific insights that marked his times. He was convinced that God did not order creation just to be useful; he also believed that God intended it to be a delight to humans as well. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* he wrote:

“Has the Lord given to the flowers so great beauty that meets our eyes, so great sweetness of fragrance that flows upon our nose, and yet will it be unlawful for our eyes to be affected by that beauty, or our sense of smell by the pleasantness of that odor. What? Did he not so distinguish colors as to make some more lovely than others? What? Did he not endow gold and silver, ivory and marble with a loveliness by which they are rendered more precious than other metals or stones? Did he not, in short, render many things praiseworthy to us, apart from their necessary use?”

But, while the Reformed tradition has not been, on the whole, productive of great art, there are some notable exceptions. One of these is Rembrandt van Rijn, born on July 15, 1606, in Leiden. Rembrandt embodied the Reformed perspective in art better than any other great artist. Rembrandt was a painter of the Bible. His painting “The Return of the Prodigal,” which is housed in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia, is a magnificent witness to the power of divine forgiveness in this vivid depiction of a father’s welcome to a returning son. That same profound understanding of Scripture is found in Rembrandt’s “Road to Emmaus” as well as many of the eight hundred other paintings, etchings, and drawings.

III.

This same celebration of the extravagance of our faith is found in music as well. Presbyterians have always understood the power of music to shape our faith. There are two books that are primary to the life of the church. The first and foremost is the Bible, which we believe to be the Word of God. The second is the Presbyterian *Hymnal*, which sets our faith to music.

The Protestant Reformers of the Sixteenth Century were divided on the use of music in the church. Ulrich Zwingli, who led the Protestant movement in Zurich, Switzerland, was opposed to the use of music in the church. Though he himself was an accomplished musician, he prohibited it from worship because he believed Scripture had made its existence impossible. John Calvin, on the other hand, incorporated music into the church, particularly the singing of the Psalms.

Calvin, however, was not blind to the power of music for good and for evil. He knew that music had a “secret and almost incredible power” to move the human heart. “When melody goes with it, every bad word penetrates much more deeply in the heart.”

All of us know that music, when it is good, can be very good, and when it is bad, it is generally very bad. Charles Colson told recently of being in a contemporary worship service. According to his report the congregation had been led through endless repetitions of a meaningless ditty called "Draw Me Close to You," which Colson said had zero theological content and could have just as easily been sung in any nightclub. Just when Colson thought it was finally and mercifully over, the music leader beamed, "Let's sing that again, shall we?" Colson yelled out "No" much to the chagrin of his fellow congregants and his wife in particular.

This morning, as we gather for worship, we celebrate the extravagant love of this unnamed woman in Matthew's gospel who poured this precious ointment on the head of Jesus in anticipation of the death that he would soon die. And we celebrate as well the extravagant love of God that is demonstrated for us during this Lenten Season not only in the death of Christ, but also in the beauty of the world around us and in the music of praise that God has so wonderfully placed in our hearts.

Amen!