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“Prodigal Sister”
John 12:1-8

INTRODUCTION: It is just six days before Passover. (this would make it the Saturday evening before Palm Sunday.) Previously, Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead and now he has returned to the home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha for a special dinner. Martha again is serving dinner and Lazarus is at table with Jesus. I would have loved to hear that dinner table conversation. (so what was it like to be dead for four days?) Suddenly, Mary kneels at Jesus feet and does something truly shocking. Hear the word of God from John 12:1-8.

Let's pray, Lord We thank you for this dramatic demonstration of love that Mary showed to you and may it serve as an example to us, an encouragement to us to pour out our gifts in your service.

Most of us are familiar with Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son--even though the word prodigal isn't in the scripture. Where do we get the word? What does it mean? To be prodigal is to be recklessly extravagant. In Jesus' parable the younger son was recklessly extravagant with his inheritance, but the father was recklessly extravagant with his grace in welcoming the younger son home. It's as much the story of a Prodigal Father as it is a Prodigal Son.

This morning's story is the story of a prodigal sister. .

As I said before, this encounter takes place AFTER Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead. Jesus took a trip into Jerusalem and then comes back to their home for the evening.

When Anne and I were going to be married, her grandfather gave us \$500 as a wedding present. This was in 1976, when I was still in seminary and Anne was in her last semester of Nursing School and we were living on a combined income of \$300 a month! Do you know what my darling fiancée did with that \$500? She bought me a Martin D-35 12 string guitar.

It was the most extravagant thing anyone had ever done for me. Anne's engagement ring only cost \$150 and the only reason I could afford that was because the pastor in Edna, Texas had a heart attack and as a seminary student I was called on to preach there for two weeks in a row and they paid \$75 a Sunday. The pastor survived and we got engaged.

As extravagant as Anne's gift to me was, to really put Mary's anointing Jesus' feet with the perfumed oil in perspective would have been for Anne to spend a year's wages on something neither she or I could ever use again. I got to play

the guitar for 20 years until I sold it to buy a necklace for Anne, but you can't put perfumed oil that cost a year's wages back in the bottle.

A few years ago there was a true story about a man in New York City who was kidnapped. His kidnapers called his wife and asked for \$100,000 ransom. She talked them down to \$30,000.

The story had a happy ending: the man returned home unharmed, the money was recovered, and the kidnapers were caught and sent to jail. But, don't you wonder what happened when the man got home and found that his wife got him back for a discount?

Calvin Trillin was a reporter on the story. He imagined out loud what the negotiations must have been like: "\$100,000 for that old guy? You have got to be crazy. Just look at him! Look at that gut! You want \$100,000 for that? You've got to be kidding. Give me a break here. \$30,000 is my top offer."

Mark Trotter concluded his rendition of the story with this thoughtful comment: "I suppose there are some here who can identify with the wife in that story, but for some reason I find myself identifying with the husband. I'd like to think if I were in a similar situation, there would be people who would spare no expense to get me back. They wouldn't haggle over the price. They wouldn't say, 'Well, let me think about it.' I like to think that they would say, 'We'll do anything for you.'"

The point of that story is this: sometimes it's O.K. to be extravagant—to be prodigal—recklessly extravagant with our devotion—especially when it comes to God!

Why did Mary do what she did? Some say it was an act of gratitude in which she was thanking Jesus for raising her brother Lazarus from the dead. Some say it was an act of consecration in which she was encouraging Jesus to go into the Holy City and do what had to be done. Others say it was a foreshadowing, an act of preparation, in which she was anointing His body for the death which was to come in Jerusalem a few days later. You will remember that on the morning of the third day after Jesus was buried women came to the tomb to anoint his body with spices, but when they arrived he had risen. In the end, Mary's anointing would be enough.

Judas said it was a waste. He lashed out with "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"

But Jesus says, "Leave her alone." And then he says something that sounds a bit confusing, if not downright callous. He says, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Judas may have been a thief and informant, he may have embezzled money from the common purse occasionally, he may have had other motives besides the high moral road he seems to project here, but isn't there some truth to his observation? It is true that the pound of expensive perfume poured on Jesus' feet could have been used to help the poor.

If you lived strictly by the Judas mind-set, you would have no steeple on the church, no flowers on the altar, no banners on the wall, no choir, no organ, no organist.

If your daughter would come to you and say, "I'm in love and I'm so happy. I want to get married." Would you say, "Well, why don't you just elope? It's much cheaper. It would be wasteful to have an expensive wedding." (Obviously I didn't) That's the Judas mind-set.

But the Mary mind-set says, "Sometimes in the name of love and kindness and gratefulness; it's O.K. Indeed, it's beautiful to be extravagant—recklessly extravagant."

Why did Mary do such a thing? Jesus suggests that the perfume has something to do with his upcoming burial. Does Mary go overboard in honoring Jesus? Is she overdoing it?

That is not really our modern problem, though, is it? Our problem is usually "underdoing" it. (if that's a word)

We take Jesus for granted. We go days without consulting him in prayer, assuming he's aware of our gratitude and thankfulness. Many times we're like the 9 lepers who run off rejoicing when we're healed rather than the one out of 10 that returned to say thanks.

I don't think it's about frugality or money at all. This story is mainly about gratitude and recognizing what Jesus has done in our lives. And whether you're rich or whether you're poor, there is a common call to stop, slow down, and give thanks.

I want to share story about another sister. Like Mary and Martha who were concerned about their brother Lazarus, this sister was also concerned about her brother. This sister's name was Tess.

Tess was a precocious eight-year-old little girl. One day she heard her mom and dad talking in a serious and somber tone about her little brother, Andrew. Tess didn't understand everything that they were saying, but she got the gist: Her little brother, Andrew, was very, very sick... and they were completely out of money. They would have to move out of their house and move into a small apartment because Mom and Dad didn't have enough money for the doctor bills and the house payment. On top of that, only a very expensive surgery could save Andrew

now... and they could not find anyone to lend them the money. Just then, Tess heard her dad say to her tearful mother in whispered desperation, "Only a miracle can save Andrew now."

Tess ran to her room, pulled out a glass jelly jar from its hiding place in her closet. She poured out all the change on the floor and counted it carefully. She then put the change back in the jar, put the jar under her arm, slipped out the back door and ran down to the Drug Store six blocks away. The pharmacist was talking to a man intently and at first he didn't notice Tess standing there. She waited patiently for a while and then dramatically cleared her throat, but still, no luck – the pharmacist did not see her. Finally, Tess got his attention by taking a quarter out of her jelly jar and tapping it on the glass counter. That did it. The pharmacist noticed her and said, "Just a minute. I'm talking to my brother from Chicago whom I haven't seen for ages."

"Well," said Tess, "I want to talk to you about my brother. He's really, really sick – and I want to buy a miracle. His name is Andrew and he has something growing inside his head and my daddy says only a miracle can save him now. So... how much does a miracle cost? I have the money here to pay for it. It's all that I have saved. If it isn't enough, I will get the rest. Just tell me how much a miracle costs."

The pharmacist's brother was a well-dressed man. He stooped down and asked Tess, "What kind of miracle does your brother need?"

"I don't know," Tess replied, with her eyes welling up. "I just know he's really sick and Mommy says he needs an operation. But my parents can't pay for it, so I want to use my money."

"How much do you have?" asked the man from Chicago.

"One dollar and eleven cents!" Tess said proudly. "It's all the money I have in the world, but I can get some more if I need to."

"Well, you are in luck," the man said with a smile. "One dollar and eleven cents is the exact price of a miracle for little brothers."

He took the money in one hand and with the other he took hold of her mitten and said, "Take me to where you live. I want to see your brother and meet your parents. Let's see if I have the kind of miracle you need."

That well-dressed man from Chicago was Dr. Carlton Armstrong who just happened to be a noted neurosurgeon. The operation was successfully completed without charge... and it wasn't long until Andrew was home again and doing well. Tess' mom and dad were so grateful. They were talking one night about the chain of events that had saved Andrew's life. "That surgery," her mom

said, “was a real miracle.” And then she said, “I just wonder how much it would have cost.”

Tess smiled. She knew exactly how much a miracle cost... one dollar and eleven cents... plus, the skill and graciousness of a great doctor... and of course, the gracious, sacrificial love of an eight-year-old big sister!

Someone might say, “Well, it was only one dollar and eleven cents”... but, it was all she had! She gave all she had to save her little brother. It was a beautiful gift from a prodigal sister.

Let’s pray. Lord, I am haunted by Mary’s reckless extravagance as she poured the precious ointment on your feet. Part of me agrees with those who rebuked her, that the money could have been better spent - in feeding the poor or paying the bills.

But you would have none of it. Unembarrassed, you accepted her gift of ointment and tears and the house was filled with the fragrance. This goes against the grain for me. I have learned the hard way that money is not to be thrown around, that I must live with prudence and modesty, thrift and discipline, or life will get out of hand.

Teach me, Lord, that there are times when love requires something more than habit and routine, a rigid timetable and a balanced check book. Lord of the dance, do you sometimes invite me to join you in fresh and spontaneous responses to life, to allow myself to be vulnerable, to make the unexpected gift, to show my love in gesture and embrace, and let myself go.

Lord, Mary knew that her moment had come and might never come again. Will you rescue me from my imprisoning inhibitions, help me to know when it is time to cast prudence aside, break open the spikenard and fill the house with the fragrance of love? (Selwyn Dawson)

Lord, this house of worship has been set aside as a costly ointment through which we might anoint you with our worship, our service, and our love for you. May the sweet perfume of our lives dedicated to doing your will go forth from these walls to permeate the earth, bringing your love to those who have never heard the message of your redeeming love. Hear us as we pray for those on our hearts.

We pray for the Holy week services coming up this next week, not only in our church but in every church around the world where people of good faith will gather to honor Jesus and to give thanks for the gift of his life for us all. We especially pray for folks who do not know about him yet that they will be drawn to places of worship during the week we call...Holy Week . Amen.