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Lent 5C
Peace, Seattle
March 13, 2016
John 12:1-8

LAVISH LOVE

Let us pray: Be with us, O God, as we continue along the Lenten path of blessing. Open our hearts to hear the story of your love poured out for us. Open our lives so we, too, can be poured out, like Mary's oil of blessing, in our world. Amen.

When Jesus called Lazarus from his grave in chapter 11 of John's gospel, he gained new followers. But he made new enemies, too.

"If we let him go on like this," said the Judeans, **"everyone will believe in him and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation."**

It was the High Priest Caiaphas who voiced the solution:
IT IS BETTER TO HAVE ONE MAN DIE FOR THE PEOPLE, he said,
THAN TO HAVE THE WHOLE NATION DESTROYED.

So from then on, Jesus was a marked man.

But in Bethany, just outside Jerusalem, Jesus is safe—at least for the moment.

Because of him, Mary and Martha had received their brother Lazarus back from beyond death's door, and this dinner for the Master in today's gospel is a gesture of gratitude and thanksgiving. Lazarus himself is the meal's host, and his sisters Martha and Mary are there with him, to serve.

With dinner in full swing, Mary takes her leave for a moment, and returns with a flask filled with a full pound of precious perfume of nard. She walks over to where Jesus reclines, unstops the bottle, and the unmistakable fragrance fills the room.

Mouths stop chewing, conversations halt in mid-sentence, and heads swivel as Mary pours the precious oil on Jesus' feet. Then, in a move that surely evoked audible gasps, she takes down her hair and begins using it to spread the oil over Jesus' feet. What a spectacle!

Each of the gospel writers tells this story in one form or another. Luke places it earlier in his gospel while Jesus is still in Galilee. Mark and Matthew set it at the home of Simon the Leper in Bethany, and speak of her anointing Jesus' head—not his feet.

In every other gospel, the woman is unnamed, but in John she is Mary, close friend and disciple of Jesus. Using the oil, Mary anoints Jesus' feet, and in an extraordinary twist, her unbound hair conveys both the depth of her feeling and her utter devotion.

I once knew a woman named Elizabeth, who, with her husband and son, was a long-term staff member at Holden Village.

Elizabeth was originally from Denmark and retained some old-world customs within her household. For example, she always wore her hair gathering up on her head when she was in public.

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Rumor had it that her hair had never been cut and went well below her waist, but she only let her hair down in the company of her family at home.

The week before Christmas one year, word got around that Elizabeth would be wearing her hair down publicly on Christmas Eve. It was not a decision she came to lightly!

When the day arrived, the whole Village witnessed the transformation as Elizabeth—with a gleam in her eye—shared the lustrous treasure of her hair with us—her Village family—in honor of Christmas.

When Mary kneels at Jesus' feet, lets her hair down, and begins acting out her devotion and gratitude, I imagine the table guests sitting in stunned silence.

According to John it's Judas who lifts his voice against Mary, speaking in terms many of us could identify with: **What a waste woman! What were you thinking? Don't you care about the poor?!**

But Jesus doesn't buy it. LEAVE HER ALONE, he says. SHE BOUGHT IT FOR THE DAY OF MY BURIAL.

The translation from Greek is a bit awkward here but the point seems to be this:

> Jesus is saying that by keeping the perfume in her possession and using it on him, Mary is announcing the nearness of Jesus' death and preparing for his burial.[1]

Mary's costly gift grows from her awareness of the costly gift Jesus himself will soon make. What the others don't yet understand, Mary grasps: that discipleship is about loving Jesus with as much abandon as he loves them, and recognizing the price such love will cost him.

And maybe that's the takeaway this morning—that those who recognize the true cost of redemption are those who love most freely and most generously.

Do you know anyone like that?

I knew a man named Ben Wolfe (AKA: FAT MAN) who, though he made a six-figure income as a CPA, continued to live with his wife Liz (AKA: THIN LADY) in the same 50's era 3-bedroom rambler in which they'd raised their three children.

Fat Man and Thin Lady operated a kind of bed and breakfast—opening their home to young people who'd lost their direction in life. 113 Ashwood was a safe place for estranged teens, where boundaries were clear, no illegal activity was tolerated, and where—as long as they stayed— guests were expected to attend Trinity Lutheran Church with Liz and Ben.

Through the years many teens found love and acceptance in the Wolfe home, and a family life far different from what they'd known.

Fat Man [FM for short] had a style all his own. The name he gave to this wayward collection of young men and women was **THE LOSERS CLUB**.

Each year on FM's birthday (Christmas) there was a big gathering of the LOSERS CLUB.

[1] Matthew Skinner, *Working Preacher* website. The full article can be found at: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?tab=4

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And each year a vote was taken to determine who best deserved the title President of the Loser's Club—a title that went to the person who'd managed to do something so incredibly foolish and loser-like during the year past that he or she deserved to be named chief of the losers that year.
It was a hoot!

A couple years before his death from cancer, FM asked Cathy (a member of the loser's club by virtue of the fact that she'd once dated FM's son!), to join him on an excursion.

FM you see had always wanted to pay cash for a car once in his life, and he wanted to buy a brand new Lincoln Continental to replace the old Buick he'd had for years. He knew Cathy had a gift for driving a bargain, so they went together to the car dealer.

She did all the talking, playing her role to the hilt. What salesman could resist having all that money waved in his face?

Well, Cathy finally got the price she wanted, and she laid out FAT MAN's cash right then and there and they were both howling as they drove away in the new Lincoln with auto everything and all leather interior.

The only condition Fat Man put on people borrowing it was that it was never to be washed. He didn't want people treating it like some kind of icon.

He wanted his family and the LOSERS to treat it just like the old Buick that he used to drive.
As far as he was concerned it was just a car, a tool. Not something to lavish affection on.

FM knew where affection was rightly lavished: on people.

He wasn't so much a lavish liver as he was a lavish giver.
He and Liz shared freely and generously of their resources to enrich the lives of those whom they felt called by God to serve. And they did it with a sense of humor!

I think FM understood what Mary was up to with that perfume…

> "Spend it all," writes Annie Dillard, "shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time... give it, give it all, give it now."[2]

Sometimes we can find ourselves in a place where we start rationing out love and affection one drop at a time, as if we're afraid to over do it, afraid our love might get all used up or wasted; or that others will misinterpret our actions.

When we go to that place, Mary, and people like FM, can show us another way.

What might it mean for you, for me, to make extravagant giving and living in the mold of Mary, part of our faith journey?

The God we see reflected in Jesus is a God who loves extravagantly and acts boldly so that all might receive the life he offers—life abundant. Mary got this. And you and I and this community we share are meant to be conduits of generosity, avenues of his lavish grace.

[2] Annie Dillard, The Writing Life. Quoted by MaryAnn McKibbon Dana in her March 2, 2016 *Living the Word* article in *Christian Century*.

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Christ's lavish giving never ceases. And true to his promise, Christ is here once again this morning as host and food, offering himself as the Bread of Life; pouring himself out for us in the sacrament of the Table. Making of us a holy community set both to be and to bear this lavish giving into the world.

Amen.