
An Extravagant Gift

A sermon by Canon Todd Smelser
Lent 5 – Year C

For most of us, gift-giving is an important aspect of being part of a family and part of a community. Who doesn't remember Christmas mornings as a child and the bounty of gifts under the tree; or the birthday celebration when just the right gift arrived from someone you loved; or the graduation or retirement party when you mark a major transition with a gift. We hold dear those notes of sympathy when a loved one dies, or that thank you note that expressed a friend's gratitude. Taking a nice bottle of wine or a bouquet of flowers to a dinner party is still an appreciated offering. After my godson's twenty-fifth birthday on March 6, I even got a thank you call for the check inside the card (even though his mother was standing nearby phone and maybe was the reminder of the call!). But except for Parker, my godson, in my own family and close circle of friends we no longer feel the need to give gifts, since there really isn't much that any of us need. We would rather make a donation to a favorite charity or to a cause that is dear. The U. S. Office of Government ethics maintains pages and pages of rules related to gift-giving among federal employees, and most companies limit gifts both to and from employees and employers. But at holiday time I still like to leave gifts for the folks who clean our house, and cut my hair and trim the bushes, and take good care of my mother in her assisted living facility. I think it's an important way to say thank you to the people who make our lives a little better.

In the Church, of course, we depend upon the gifts of members and friends in order to sustain our ministries and pay our staff. Stewardship is the code word in the church for the pledges and loose offerings which support the church's annual budget. Although many institutions like the Cathedral have an endowment, that pot of money is never used for the operating budget, but rather for special projects not covered by the budget—like a new roof or sound system. When I was leading parishes I always encouraged folks to endow their pledge to the Church, leaving enough funds in one's will to sustain your pledge, even after your death. Although the clergy don't take personal gifts for our services of ministry we do maintain discretionary funds that help with continuing education or helping those in financial need. Recently the Cathedral Book Store, which receives no funding from the Cathedral except in kind service for the space, began a supportive group called Book Fellows. This will allow the Book Store to receive gifts to help maintain a healthy balance sheet and offer educational programs to the parish and community. Personally, of course, we all have our favorite passions and interests which we like to support—be they our alma mater, the symphony, the botanical garden or the humane shelter. These gifts are always important and needed to maintain the kind of society and community we want to live in.

Today's Gospel reading from John tells a story about giving—about extravagant giving—giving that made Judas just as uncomfortable as it might make us. Jesus is in the town of Bethany, on his way to Jerusalem for the last time. He stops to spend the evening with his good friend Lazarus, whom he raised from the dead not long before. Mary and Martha, Lazarus' sisters are there as well, making dinner, catching up and sharing time together. Of course we don't know much about what they talked about that evening, but by the time our story unfolds, it seems that everyone understood what the future was to bring. The road to Jerusalem for Jesus would not end well.

After Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, the word about his miracle spread throughout the region. This was Jesus' most incredible miracle yet—the defeat of death itself—and it caused many more people to believe in him. But as more people believed, others began to fear. The Pharisees had begun their plot to have Jesus killed, sure that if they didn't stop him the Romans would destroy everything they held dear. The time was short and the fears real as they break bread in Bethany that night.

This poignant scene reminds us that scarcity and abundance are really the twin themes of Lent. In this season we have walked through the wilderness, perhaps trying to replace old habits with new ones. We may have given up something we really enjoy and taken on a new discipline or practice. Traveling our road toward Jerusalem, week by week, we know that the road always leads us to the foot of the cross on Good Friday. And yet, we are always mindful of how the story ends. We walk through the shadow of the Lenten valley, knowing that while Jesus' time on earth is short, God's grace is always abundant and forever. For Easter is just around the corner.

In today's reading, Mary does something that is both very holy and very human. She slips from the table and kneels at Jesus' feet with a pound of very expensive perfumed oil. Perhaps in gratitude for saving her brother's life, or in anticipatory grief for what will soon happen to Jesus, fearful of the future, words seem to fail her. So instead of speaking, Mary lavishes on her Lord an absurdly expensive gift—perfume that would cost a whole year's wages. It is a profound gesture—sensuous, rich and tender. And John tells us that the whole room was filled with fragrance as Mary anointed Jesus.

But not everyone is pleased with this gift. Judas Iscariot, the disciple who would betray Jesus, is also there. He thinks Mary is being wasteful—that the money should have been spent on the poor. We know, of course that Judas really cares nothing for the poor, but for his own life, and that soon he will betray his Master to the authorities. Mary and Judas seem to be part of the cast of this redemptive story that will unfold during Holy Week.

Jesus tells Mary's critics to "leave her alone." Jesus then reminds them that they will always have the poor in their midst to help and minister with. But they will not always have him. Ultimately this is not just a story about generosity, but it is a love story. It is a story about what measures we take when we love someone as much as Mary and her family loved Jesus.

For the Christian community, Jesus is the ultimate gift of God. According to John's Gospel, Jesus is sent into a world that did not request him, yet he acts entirely for their benefit. In his ministry and in his walk toward Jerusalem, he is always revealing the grace and truth of God his Father. God calls us as well to love without the cost, always willing to be extravagant in our love and compassion for others.

As Christians, we live our lives in the shadow of the cross; but we also live our lives in the presence of the Risen Christ. In a world which seems to live in a place of scarcity, we proclaim a world of abundance. In this prelude to the Passion that will begin next Sunday, we come here to offer our gifts, always thankful for the ultimate gift of God, his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.