

‘Pay It Forward’  
Rev. Dr. Ann C. Kemper  
March 13, 2016  
based on John 12:1-8

*Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup>There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. <sup>3</sup>Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. <sup>4</sup>But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup>“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” <sup>6</sup>(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) <sup>7</sup>Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup>You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”*

Today is the last Sunday before look at scripture retelling Jesus’ Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. My! Hasn’t Lent flown by! We have one more full week before Holy Week.

With the exception of today, our worship focus this Lent has centered on stories of Jesus from the Gospel of Luke. Luke was quite the story teller! From those stories we learned:

- we must confess with words our faith in God; and not only confess, but declare our faith boldly!
- we learned there will be those (even those in positions of power) who will try to scare us away from doing what we are called to do in our churches and in our neighborhoods...do we run in fear? Or stand in faith?
- we also learned God is a God of second changes; and third; and fourth; and more. Returning to God is always an option because of God’s unending capacity for grace, mercy and forgiveness.

Last week we reviewed Luke’s famous parable of the Prodigal Son...and we talked about God’s prodigal self in the way God extends wasteful extravagant grace to those who were lost but then found. I think we could all identify with the young son in more ways than we’d like.

...and even more so...the jealousy, angry older brother.

Wasteful extravagance, we decided was only wasteful when it was selfish wastefulness...not *shared* or gifted wastefulness.

The theme of wasteful extravagance continues today with the famous story in the Book of John about Mary who pours an entire pound of costly perfume to anoint Jesus’ feet.

This story, so intimate in its setting, our cheeks blush at the thought of this woman bending down to wipe Jesus' feet with her hair. This setting goes way beyond the bounds of propriety in that day and age, and even in our day where people have less and less personal space.

Jesus defends Mary's wasteful extravagance commanding Judas to 'leave her alone.' Then reminding Judas, and the other disciples, there will always be people with whom you can be wastefully extravagant, but you won't always have me.

The last sentence in this snippet of scripture has been misconstrued for eons. "8You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." This one sentence has been used to defend the 'why bother' attitude that supported a careless, misguided and even intentional snub of basic responsibilities of caring for God's people...especially God's preferential option for the poor.

It's such a shame to think about the multitudes of economically poor people who have suffered because someone in power decided to interpret that one sentence as an inevitability...not as a command to be responsible and even wastefully extravagant with God's chosen people.

What Jesus was saying (based on scripture in Deuteronomy) was that the wasteful extravagance Mary displays in anointing Jesus' feet...is for us to do the same! Jesus, as a human being, teacher, guide, friend, companion...would not always be with the 12 disciples; but there will always be those whom God prefers in need of God's wasteful extravagant grace!

Perhaps another confusing element in this verse is that "the poor" is speaking of people. "Poverty" is a societal and economical condition that prohibits masses of people to flourish and thrive in a world where those in power turn a blind eye to this economic unfairness.

Poverty is a condition in opposition to every single verse of scripture...yet we tolerate it...even contribute to it in unseen and unknown ways.

The church has always been a champion for the poor...or those who live in poverty. Yet, we sit here in our worship services week after week wondering what it is we could do to make things better for the poor.

Poverty is such an overwhelmingly HUGE problem! Surely there isn't anything we could do as a little congregation to solve the problem of poverty; where we could actually work to make the world a better place.

Or is there?

Have any of you seen the movie 'Pay It Forward'? Starring Kevin Spacey, Helen Hunt, and Haley Joel Osment. The movie was based on a book by Catherine Ryan Hyde and came out in 2000.

Without giving too much away (in case you haven't seen it)...because the end is worth the watching...the movie is about:

Trevor, a 7<sup>th</sup> grader, is given a Social Studies assignment where he must come up with an action plan to change the world for the better. What the movie is about is how the world around Trevor *does* change for the better because of his action plan.

Trevor comes up a plan to do a favor for three people asking for nothing in return; but asks them that they pay the favor forward by doing three other people a favor.

Little does Trevor know...and much to the surprise of his Social Studies teacher, the world around them does begin to change for the better! Story after story of how people are moved by the kind and extravagant gestures inspire even grumpy, isolated, chemically dependent people to change their lives!

Here was this little 7<sup>th</sup> grade boy who imagines a world being kind to one another. Does he take grief? Yes...it the most painful of ways. [You'll find out how if you watch the movie.]

You can hear Jesus say, "Leave him alone. You will always have those whose lives are in need of a favor, but you won't always have Trevor."

You see! The secret to wasteful extravagance is to pay it forward!

If you are the recipient of God's gracious favor...pay it forward! Let at least three other people you come across know God's full, unbridled, wasteful, extravagant grace and the best way to accept the gift is to pay it forward.

Mary poured an entire pound of expensive perfume over the feet of Jesus. How wastefully extravagant is that? How do we (as disciples of Christ) pay that act forward?

Let's see.....

Let's think both practically and metaphorically.

To pay it forward in a practical sense means we engage in a kind of random kindness tit for tat. You do me a favor (thank you so much!)...I do a favor for three other people.

And not only a favor...an anonymous favor! Remember Jesus told us to let our gifts to God go unnoticed by others and trust that God in heaven knows of your kindness.

Last week someone made an anonymous donation to the church that had an unbelievable ripple effect. I watched as family member after family member felt so blessed by that unknown person.

It changed the entire day!

It changed people's outlooks!

It changed the way people treated one another.

It's funny how sermons work. As I watched this act of kindness unfold in the church, I had no idea it would in any way relate to how Mary did an extraordinary favor for Jesus.

...And how two millennia of persons have read and heard about Mary's wasteful extravagance act and incorporated it into their lives...by paying it forward! Sometimes unwittingly...sometimes intentionally.

In a metaphorical sense, to pay it forward means we don't hang onto or keep God's prodigal grace to ourselves. We share it!

But we don't share it so that we can be recognized...but share it in ways the gift gets the credit...not you or I.

Mary had already received the greatest favor ever from Jesus in the resurrection of her beloved brother Lazarus.

She paid it forward by anointing Jesus' feet that not only showered him with thanks and praise...but from John's perspective, foretold the very anointing of Jesus' body upon death.

We are now going at light speed toward Easter. We don't have much time left.

What and how will you pay forward God's wasteful extravagant grace this week? Let's make the world a better place by the time we come back to wave palms and sing Hosannas next week.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.