

An Extravagant Gift

A Sermon Expositing John 12:1-8

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The hope, we can imagine, was to create a sense of majesty and for my part, it worked. Every part of taking in that place was transcendent starting with my first view of it. As I walked around the corner it felt like I was already standing immediately in front of St. Peter's Basilica even though I was still half a mile away. That is thanks in part to its physical grandeur. Though it was built through the 16th and into the 17th centuries, it remains the tallest dome in the world at 448 feet. Aside from the sense of sheer magnitude I was also taken in by the staggering scope of work required to build such a structure without modern machinery. No wonder it took more than a century. Finally approaching and entering the building did little to restore my breath. The marble terrazzo floors were so stunning I almost forgot to notice the masterpieces of sculpture and painting lining the walls of the side chapels – pieces by the most famous names in Renaissance art. And even still with all the beauty at or below eye level, my gaze was drawn instinctually up; up to Bernini's baldachin, the 5 story bronze canopy over the high altar – yes, that high, but higher still – up into the dome where a gilded image of cherubs surrounds the image of God's presence in the form of a dove and sunlight streams in through the oculus to illumine all of what is happening below. From the moment I saw that space from half a mile away my focus was drawn beyond – beyond the building as it stands to the hands of those who so long ago built it and to their motivation; beyond the art to its creators to their creator; beyond the oculus to the heavens themselves; beyond the altar to the one who inspired it all.

If worship can take the form of architecture, then St. Peter's Basilica must surely be the highest of the form. No expense spared, the finest art, the grandest space, gilded and glinting standing there for anyone to behold. Majesty.

As I had taken in all I could of that place and started my trek back I made my way through St Peter's square under the watchful eye of the stone saints atop the colonnade and down the street extending out from the square full of shops and Vatican administrative buildings. While still in the shadow of that majestic dome I came upon two men sitting on the steps outside a building, both poorly kempt, both looked tired. As I passed them my eyes connected with theirs – there was something transcendent about that too – and one of them asked a question in Italian I didn't fully understand, but the meaning was clear. I shared some of the Euros I had with me hoping they'd find a meal or a resting place or some comfort that evening. I knew that just a few square feet of this property had enough value to feed them both their children if they had any and their children's children for generations to come. What a tension! I can't say that I'm sorry those buildings are there, I can't say that I'm sorry expense goes into creating spaces and experiences and moments of transcendent worship everywhere, but...that's expense that could go into supporting the poor and eliminating poverty.

Even as far back as the penning of sacred Christian texts this tension has been felt. We encounter today a story in John's gospel that is present in varied forms in the other 3 gospels as well. The story pits on one hand, Mary's extravagant gift of expensive perfume being used to clean Jesus' feet against the idea that this extravagance would have been better spent on behalf of the poor. That story still resonates through this

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

community of worship, this community of service. In a thousand ways and on a routine basis we decide either thoughtfully or passively whether we will emphasize the worship of God or service to and for God's beloved. We decide that financially, we decide that in the way we allow or *encourage* our building to be used, we decide that based on how we plan our faith formation activities. We've even had to weigh the tension between worship and care of the vulnerable in the way we respond to a global pandemic. Who saw that one coming?

But it isn't all collective. You make choices individually between worship and service when you give of your time, resources, and energies to this faith community as opposed to say, a charity. Yes, of course we hope and pray that we're participating in the redemption of our wider community, but you know when contributing here at least some part of what you've given will go to sustaining *this* community meaning yes, our service to others, but also to our fellowship and our education and our worship and, yes, keeping up our building and grounds.

To be sure worship and service are not always pitted against one another, but when they are, how are we supposed to choose?

Read between the lines. In this case John actually gives us what's between the lines in the form of parenthetical material. John places the objection over the use of the perfume on the lips of his would-be-betrayer, Judas and is the only gospel writer to suggest that Judas has an ulterior motive. John tells us that Judas is a thief of a treasurer and wanted the gift liquidated so he could get his hands on the profit. "Thief" may well be an appropriate word, but we clearly do not have here the case of one who absconds with the whole of the community purse. The narrator here seems to know that Judas was dishonest with the group's holdings, but the group does not seem to be aware as of yet. That probably means we have here one who skims off the top. One who takes his cut and enjoys the benefits of holding the coin. Said another way, He was a *beneficiary* of the activities of Jesus far more than he was a *contributor* to them. This was his sin. Hold that thought.

John goes on to tell us how Jesus responded to Judas's objection. Jesus himself does not address Judas's ulterior motive, he addresses the tension between an act of worship, that is an extravagant gift of perfume to Jesus, and an act of service selling the perfume for the benefit of the poor. If we don't read carefully it might sound like Jesus prefers the act of worship, but his concluding words, "You always have the poor with you..." are the beginning of a quotation from Deuteronomy 15, which John's audience would have been familiar with. The rest of that statement is, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land." In so saying, Jesus has affirmed the act of worship *and* the act of service. He has destroyed our tension!

In its place though, he has set up a new tension. You remember the sin of Judas don't you? His was the sin of being a beneficiary of the work of Jesus without being much of a participant. He was a theological consumer! John has set the new tension between an active form of worship and a consumerist form of following Jesus. The implication of where we belong on this progression is clear. Worship and service are false alternatives, they simply co-exist, two sides of the same coin, but a form of discipleship which asks, "What's in it for me?" has nothing to do with true discipleship.

The way of discipleship, the way of *being* the church has nothing to do with what we *get* out of it. It's about what we *give* into it and when we give, we worship – as Mary did, preparing Jesus in a sense for burial again. Is this not what it means to worship? To participate in and reiterate the sacrificial love of God in our world, to participate in the death of Christ. To participate in the death is to pave the way for resurrection.

And so what about those altars of gold? What about those massive churches and costly spaces of worship? Well, I propose we let Rome worry about Rome and we'll tend to our own questions. When we gather, are we in search of merely what is fulfilling or enriching to us? Or do we gather in the hope of building and sustaining a community that serves and advocates for those whose basic needs go unmet? The specific answers to these and many other questions like them are better answered in community and in dialogue than by a pastor from the pulpit, but one thing we must say here is that as long as our answers are given in extravagant love, we can't miss.