

Isaiah 43:16-21  
Philippians 3:4b-14  
John 12:1-8  
Psalm 126

Lent 5 C  
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island  
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The Rev. Karen Haig

### Extravagant Love

What is your deepest longing? I'll give you a moment. It doesn't have to be your final answer, but it needs to be true. What do you deeply long for, and what tangible thing could exemplify that longing? Now, if you're willing turn and tell the person next to you.

This little jar is filled with nard from Jerusalem, and it represents my deepest longing. I imagine it to be just like the nard Mary poured over Jesus' feet, just like the nard Judas rebuked her for wasting, just like the nard that filled Mary and Martha's house with the divine fragrance of costly perfume. My deepest longing isn't for this luscious, fragrant, costly nard. I think my deepest longing might be like Mary's. It seems to me that Mary's deepest longing was for Jesus. Not for something from Jesus, but a pure, simple, and deep desire just to be with Jesus, sitting at his feet. That's where Mary was the last time Jesus came for dinner. We're told Jesus loved Martha, Mary and Lazarus and they loved him too. He probably didn't love them any more than he loved everybody else, but they were dear friends, different from the others, even the twelve. They seem like the "walk in the front door and plunk yourself down on the couch" kind of friends. We don't hear about Jesus having very many friends like that. Oh, he had followers, lots of them, and people clamoring after him, and of course there were the twelve. But friends?

It's hard to have real friends when people think you have something they don't, when they think you have something they want. It's hard to have real friends when you've been set apart or when you're perceived to be different from the people around you. When you're different, people are often a little stand-offish. But not Martha, Mary and Lazarus. They all knew who Jesus was, knew the power he could harness and use, and knew that he would do that. Yet when we listen in on their conversations, we recognize the intimacy between them. Their conversations always seemed so comfortable... even after Martha recognized Jesus as the Messiah, even after Jesus had raised her brother Lazarus from the dead.

But this is a story about so much more than friendship. And while it isn't mostly a story about the poor, hearing Jesus say, "*You always have the poor with you but you do not always have me,*" seems quite provocative. That line has, for a very long time, been used to justify institutionalized poverty and the huge chasm between rich and poor. After all, if JESUS says we're always going to have the poor with us then maybe we don't need to worry about that so much. Maybe it's just the way the world is. Maybe it's God's plan that there are always poor people. I don't think so. Jesus was likely quoting scripture and this time it was Moses who said, "*Poor people will never disappear from the earth. That's why I'm giving you this command:*

*you must open your hand generously to your fellow Israelites, to the needy among you, and to the poor who live with you in your land.”<sup>1</sup>*

You’ve heard me say many times that we need to take care when reading scripture. All those of you who have written those beautiful Lenten reflections know very well what I mean. We need to read before and after. We need to read different translations. And it’s really good if we can go back to the Hebrew or the Greek when the text is particularly perplexing. I’m not fluent in Greek – but I do know enough to be able to look things up! Greek isn’t very much like English and when you add the fact that there isn’t really any punctuation, translating can get very tricky. So, when Jesus said You always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me, we can interpret in a couple of ways: as a statement about what is: you always have the poor with you; or as a command: Always have the poor with you.

You see in the Greek text, those entirely different ideas are written the same way. I wonder if Jesus was telling us we need to keep the poor close so we can care for them, open our hands and hearts to them, be the face of Christ for them. Jesus always cared for the poor. Today we even hear Judas allegedly caring for the poor. Judas was a traitor and a thief whose part in the story is very important, not because God planned for Jesus to be crucified and Judas had to help. Judas is so important in the story, because as part of Jesus’ inner circle, as one of the disciples, he shows us that God’s embrace is wide enough for everyone. In God’s reality, all are welcome, even the ones who are the worst bad behaviors. Maybe especially the ones who are the worst bad behaviors. And this, I think, finally takes us to what this story really is about.

This is a story about the utterly extravagant nature of God’s love. Next weekend we will celebrate Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. We hear this story in these last days of Lent because it warns of what is to come. Not just the foreshadowing of Jesus’ death, but the extravagant nature of his love... Love poured out not just by Jesus, but by one of his dearest friends too. As it turns out, Mary realized something that others had not. She understood that Jesus was going to die and so she anointed him for burial.

In 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, anointing happened for two reasons, kingship, and burial. If you’re a king, your head is anointed. If you are dying, it’s your feet. So, Mary, the one who sat at Jesus’ feet, the one who knows herself to be friend and disciple, the one who has been paying exquisite attention, the one who is very much a prophet, anointed Jesus for burial. And when Judas tried to distract everyone with his complaint about the scandalous waste of money - a year’s worth of wages - Jesus says “no.” In her act of lavishing such a quantity of costly perfume on Jesus, Mary showed us something Jesus’ other friends and followers did not. She showed us what it is to be a true disciple, to give absolutely everything in an act of pure humility. It wasn’t just a dribbling from that alabaster jar, but all of it, every last drop poured out on Jesus’ feet, so much in fact, that the entirety of Martha’s big, beautiful house was filled with fragrance, a fragrance likely still in the air on the day Jesus was crucified...

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 15:11

The way Mary wiped Jesus' feet with her hair reminds us of the way Jesus wiped the disciple's feet after washing them at their last supper together. Turns out they were doing the same thing – that's that going back to the Greek thing- it's the same word in both places. Wiping Jesus' feet with her hair in precisely the same way Jesus would wipe the disciple's feet with the towel he hung around his waist, was an act of extreme humility. She likely learned it from Jesus – or maybe he learned it from her. Jesus received from Mary what he would just days later offer his closest followers – an act of profound humility and boundless love. Extravagant love poured out; extravagant love received. What would our lives be like if we spent them on taking in and giving away God's boundless and extravagant love? What would that look like for you? Don't worry, I won't ask you to tell anyone.

In Cana, Jesus turned water in to more wine than anyone could ever have drunk<sup>2</sup>. On a mountain top Jesus fed over 5,000 people<sup>3</sup>. On the Sea of Galilee, Jesus said "*throw your nets there*" and so many fish were caught up in the nets that they began to burst<sup>4</sup>. This is Jesus, offering extravagant love in whatever ways people need it in order to understand who our God is. It's exactly what Mary did, and just exactly what we're called to do too.

My little jar of nard sits on a shelf in my office. I see it every day and it reminds me that my deepest longing is to be like the one who sat at Jesus' feet, while her sister Martha took care of all the work of making that first dinner party happen. My deepest longing is to be like the one who knelt weeping at Jesus feet when her brother Lazarus died. My deepest longing is to be like the one who anointed Jesus' feet with the costliest perfume imaginable, and wiped them with her hair. My deepest longing is just to be with Jesus. Knowing that has been my Lenten blessing this year.

Did you remember that it's still Lent? We often think of Lent as a time of denial - a time to deny ourselves those things which seem to us to be self-indulgent. But I am learning that Lent can be a time of extravagant indulgence - forty luxurious days of indulging that deep, deep longing in my soul, my pure, simple and deep desire for God. There are twelve days left. I wonder what you'll do with them. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> John 2:1-12

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 14:13-21

<sup>4</sup> Luke 5:4-7