

**Sermon Preached
by Doug King
Lent IV
March 30, 2003
Isaiah 43:16-21, John 12:1-5**

The most expensive piece of furniture I own is a lovely cherry wood flip top dining room table. When it is fully opened it comfortably seats twelve. I do not have nor can I afford another item of furniture in its price range. Heck, I could not even afford the table when I purchased it, but I had to have it. You see I am a big fan of the dinner party, Candle light, linen napkins, wonderful music in the background, cocktails and appetizers at seven, dinner at eight. I love to gather friends around the table and serve too much rich food and too much wine and while away the hours in conversation. One of the sad conclusions of my life is that I do not throw nearly enough dinner parties. There are so many friends I want to have over for dinner and have not gotten around to yet. Dinner parties are times of over-indulgence, spirited conversation, laughter, and perhaps a surprise or two. I cannot get enough of any of these things in my life.

In our text from the gospel of John this morning we heard tale of a dinner party at the home of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. Now this dinner party brings together two old friends at a fascinating intersection of their lives. Lazarus has just days earlier been literally raised from the dead, called out of his tomb, by Jesus. And Jesus is recognizing the shadow of his cross falling across the horizon of the days ahead. Sitting across the table from each other we have one man who has the aftertaste of death upon his lips and one whose lips are beginning to sample foretaste of the death to come. I cannot begin to imagine the nature of their conversation, what might have been said, what was left unsaid but understood looking into each other's eyes. Each of them catching glimpses in the other of what lies beyond what the living know.

The others around the table must have been mystified by these two men together. The energy and the mood of the room must have been flavored with mortality. Days earlier when Jesus was approaching Lazarus' tomb, the ever practical Martha warned

Jesus, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." A hint of that stench of death must have been in the room as these two men so close to death sat together.

In the midst of this scene and this smell of death, Lazarus' other sister Mary, the very unpractical one, takes a pound of perfume, a pound, made of pure nard and begins anointing Jesus' feet and wiping them with her hair. The perfume would have cost a year's worth of wages of a common laborer. The act was extravagant, unpredictable, inappropriate, and frankly the only right thing to be done.

In that room with the stench of death in the air, with the pallor of fleshly mortality hanging over it, this outrageous display flooded the room with the overpowering scent of a gracious and loving act of unnecessary kindness. Mary knows what she is doing. Normally when a person in ancient Palestine was anointed with perfume it is applied to their head. The anointing begins at the feet only when a body is being prepared to be buried. Mary can sense what is coming for Jesus but for this evening her outrageous behavior will keep the stench of death at bay. We should all be so well loved.

Of course Judas is right the money could have been used to do wonderfully practical helpful things in the world. But this is a case of Judas knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing. There is hardly anything practical in the extravagant expression of our love of God or each other and yet there is perhaps nothing we need more. We need to be extravagant and impractical in our love to our God and we need to offer the same extravagance to each other.

But we would be mistaken if we assumed that extravagant loving behavior was dependent upon financial wealth. My friend Dean Thompson writes about a woman who taught him the lesson of extravagant loving. "I once knew a peculiar woman in Appalachia. She was very dear to me. She was a simple soul. She was one of the most non-pretentious persons I've ever known. She told me once that she had very few possessions in life she could not give away. That was the way she operated. She loved to

make beautiful Afghans, which she placed on furniture throughout her home. Maybe you would be in her home, and maybe in the course of conversation you would casually or politely mention the beauty of one of her Afghans. Well, as you left her home, she would simply and shyly hand you a brown grocery bag with the Afghan tucked inside. A simple yet extravagant gift for you and you alone. It is a gift to be simple yet extravagant when it comes to one's love of God and others."

In these days of constant death toll counts scrawling along the bottom of our television screens, the stench of death and our mortality is certainly in the air. Of course in reality it always is. We are constantly reminded of the limitations of this life, the ways our bodies fail us physically, the ways we fail each other emotionally, the ways hatred spans the globe. This war serves to remind us of how broken the entire world is now, has been in the past and very likely will be in the future.

Now of course there are practical ways that we respond to these limitations, regular check ups with our doctor to keep an eye on our bodies, perhaps counseling to deal with our emotional issues, social activism to seek to be a part of finding solutions to the world's ills. But you wrap up all of these sensible actions and they do not begin to remove that stench of death from our nostrils.

We need to learn from Mary. It is only in extravagant loving that death is overcome. It is only by being extremely impractical that we can lift the burden of our mortality off our shoulders even for a moment. Mary is preparing Jesus for the extravagantly impractical act of dying on a cross for people who have betrayed and abandoned him. And in this entirely inappropriate act he will defeat death for us all.

The only way that we too can participate in the defeat of death is by our own inappropriate actions. We must stand in the midst of this broken world and be absurd. We must spend our love without thought to the cost, spreading it richly and carelessly to the deserving and the undeserving alike. We must love our loved ones beyond the love they offer us and then love even those who despise us. We must absurdly find ways to

love those people in Egypt and Syria and across the Middle East who curse our very existence and who cheer at the sight of pictures of fallen U.S. soldiers. We must mourn for those Iraqi soldiers fallen in battle, even as we mourn the loss of our very own who they have killed.

I am not sure how we go about loving this way. But if we do not seek to love as Jesus loved why should we follow Jesus at all? In these days of lent we are reminded that the cross Jesus is relentlessly walking towards is nothing but nonsense, and foolishness, and love beyond all reason. We find ourselves with the hard choice of choosing the world's appropriate common sense or the silly extravagance of our God. Can we, do we dare change the invitation lists of our dinner parties to include not just those who love us but those who despise us as well? Amen.