

AO-20090101 [15]: Extravagant Love

B-Extravagant Love, John 12:1-8

I want to direct your attention to a passage from the Gospel according to St. John, and it is the final talk on the boat, 'Life set free.' We started by saying, or rather, by suggesting the negative aspects of being set free from inability and spiritual eminence, and then we learn to walk. Yesterday, I tried to share with you 'Set Free to Live,' not only the negative, but it must be a positive aspect to live, and we saw how Jesus Christ makes dead men and women live, and live afresh, and really that is the true meaning of 2nd Corinthians 5:17. When a person is caught up in the life giving love of Jesus Christ that person can no longer remain stale, but they become a fresh creature, someone who really lives in circumstances of life afresh, every day is fresh for a christian. Every experience, no matter how nasty, it can be turned into a stepping stone for fresh living. It is Christ alone who can make life, indeed, fresh and alive.

Now, of course we saw the different aspects of that wonderful new life, or fresh life, and one of the aspects I wanted to leave with you was that it is kept fresh because it is kept clean. There is a phase in which the spirit of God continually applies the miracle of God's love upon the accumulated failures and sins of life so that every day is absolutely a clean thing. The blood of Jesus Christ His Son, cleanses us, and this is not a theory, a lovely theological thought, this is actually in practice. This morning I want to say, 'Set free' to serve. Now, of course, the word 'service' can be quite a funny word, it has got over-tones of being under and things on top, this is not what I am saying. In the christian sense service is never really in the sense, in the true sense, a duty. Service in the true Christian sense is a privilege, something which creates you, and because it is criteria or criterion is love, and when a person

serves in love they never feel it is a duty, although it is the most binding duty you can find anywhere, and yet, it is a releasing ministry. We have a prayer in the Episcopalian prayer book which says, 'To serve you is perfect freedom.'

I want to read with you from John Chapter 12 because there you have got a very beautiful passage which will give it to you better than my little words. John chapter 12:1, and it is a story which you all have known, the story of that home in Bethany, Mary, Martha and their brother Lazarus, and this is what John records for us to look at. Remember, 'set free to serve.' "Six days before Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, the village of Lazarus whom He had raised from the dead. They gave a supper for Him there, and Martha waited on the party while Lazarus took his place at the table with Jesus. Then Mary took a whole pound of very expensive perfume and anointed Jesus' feet and then wiped them with her hair. The entire house was filled with the presence of the perfume, but one of His disciples, Judas Escariot, the man who was going to betray Jesus, jumped up, "Why on earth wasn't this perfume sold? It's worth thirty pounds which could have been given to the poor." And then, of course, He said, Jesus said, "Why bother the lady?"

Now here is a story in Bethany, and ⁱⁿ this story simple as it sounds there are a number of characters. One, is Martha. It's in the village of Bethany, an unusual miracle has taken place which brought Lazarus to life. Unique, changed the whole atmosphere of Bethany. The sisters had their tears wiped dry. The community had a man restored. It was exciting, it was fresh. Out of that, out of thanksgiving, wondering gratitude they prepared a supper, and He came to Bethany to supper at Martha's own house, and as they sat there, there are these three characters. One was Martha.

An ordinary person who always expressed her love in service. She was a very good wife, sort of a housewife I suppose, although we don't know about her husband, but she was ^{an} married girl in a house perhaps. Her activities are very well known, in Luke chapter 10:30 and so forth, but she used her gift in cooking and recipes and the kitchen to express how much she loved Jesus Christ, so that there is nothing wrong in working hard in the kitchen. And also, it just simply means that a person can serve the Lord as well in the kitchen as in the pulpit, as well in the glare of men or hidden in those services of everyday life, and usually even before those who appear to us to be tremendous, behind there is a quiet ministry which makes the man or the woman who comes into public eye.

And Martha was that character, was that type who was a loving, practical woman in a home. Bless her, she served the Master very well. Of course, I believe, on that particular day I think her recipes were a bit confused. She simply couldn't tell exactly which was the best to express, through which to express how much, how grateful she was to the Master who had restored her dear brother to life. And then we move on to another lady, and the lady is called Mary. This one was not very, very practical, sometimes when you read the New Testament she was a little bit sentimental. However, she was actually a typical lover, she simply did not know what to do, and whatever she did seemed to be very simple, and I want you on this particular lady, a heading of a number of things I want to suggest here. Here we call 'Love Extravagant.' In other words, not calculating love. Mary looked around, she saw her sister very busy, and Lazarus calmly sitting with the guests, and the Lord Jesus who had done so much, sitting at table, and she simply thought, "How on earth can I express how much I love Him?"

What can I do, what can I give?" So, she goes into the bedroom and scripture says, 'She brought the most expensive perfume.' And that was all she had in her possession, as you can tell from Judas' own complaint. Judas is another character I haven't yet come to, now we are talking about Mary. The extravagant love of the passage. She goes to the bedroom, she brings this beautiful thing, she breaks it open, she pours the entire content upon the feet of the Master.

Love never calculated. And yet in doing this she was giving everything without thinking. I read a little story about, in a book, about an American couple. I think it's ? and ? in one of those your famous stories written by O. Henry, and the story goes like this; that this American couple was very poor. Jim and Jane were terribly poor, they didn't have much in the world. But Jane had beautiful hair and this was her glory. Of course, it used to cover her like a beautiful rose. And then Jim, the only thing Jim had in the world was a watch, a beautiful watch left him by his father, and as they came near Christmas, of course as it is your custom to give Christmas gifts, Jane wants to give Jim a beautiful gift and she had only a dollar and seventy eight cents, that is all that she had. But they were greatly in love these two, and although they were very poor they had tremendous love, and so, now Jane wants to express it, it is near Christmas and she goes, and she goes to the people in the town and she sells her hair. So, they chopped off that beautiful hair and they gave her twenty dollars and she goes and she buys beautiful things for the golden watch of her dear beloved Jim.

And then Jim, of course, is thinking what to do for Jane, and he goes and he sells the watch, and he buys one of those beautiful combs for Jane's hair. And so when Jim comes back in the evening and sees his dear, beloved

Jane has no hair at all (laughter), and of course, Jim is taken back but still he loves her dearly all the same, hair or no hair. (laughter) And then he comes near and almost before he could ask questions about what happened to the beautiful hair, Jane presents him with a beautiful chain bought particularly that it may keep and look after that very precious watch. And then, of course, Jim presents Jane with a beautiful comb which he bought by selling his watch, so in this case, everyone gave everything for the other without counting the price. The hair had gone for Jim's watch, and Jim's watch had gone for Jane's hair, and really, this is the beauty of the whole thing. This is love extravagant, this is love giving all for the beloved.

And Mary, therefore, if you remove from the other story and come to the New Testament story, she pours everything at the Master's feet without counting the price, without calculating at all, and expressing is very, very deep it touches the Saviours heart. It was done extravagantly, and secondly, rather humbly. Remember, she never annointed the Saviours head, she annointed the Saviours feet. Among the Jews the annointing begun at the head, particularly with such a costly perfume. It should have been poured upon the head, but she never thought that she was good enough for that. This was not doing honour to Jesus, this was expressing in wondering love how much she owed to the Master. Her love, her heart, her all was gone, it was a wonderful thing, humbly poured at His feet. And then thirdly, it was entire, unself-consciousness. Love sometimes becomes so abandoned to the beloved that it becomes oblivious to what is going on.

Sometimes you see young people, you know, walking down the street as if there was no-one in the whole world except the both of them. Sometimes they do all sorts of funny things. Funny because those who are spectators

you see, to as far as they are concerned it is just normal, they want to show how much they love each other, although it embarrasses the rest of the people who look on. (laughter) So now, here comes Mary and she does something you have read about. She unloosened her hair. She undid her hair, and in Palestine as soon as a girl was married her hair was tied, never again to be loosened, to be made loose. And if a lady in Palestine did that, it was a bit terrible among the Jews and all the Palestinians in those days.

So, now here comes a lady and it is in public, and there are guests there and she loosens her hair and wiped the Master's feet with that hair, which was against tradition, but she did it in absolute unself-consciousness. She was not aware of who looked on or what they thought, or who criticised, her whole attention was absolutely captivated by Him who had done so much for her dear brother and for herself. Love extravagant pouring everything that it had like Jane and Jim did in your story. And particularly here, but you know, as for Mary it was absolutely a repeating of what had happened. Jesus had actually done more than that. It was He who in absolute extravagance left His glory, emptied Himself of power and authority and became like me, and that was the most extravagant way of loving, and you know where it ended - on the Cross of Calvary. He who was perfect was acted upon as a criminal, treated as sin for my sake. Left in nakedness and shame and absolute loneliness, that he may embrace the lonely, the naked ashamed world. That is the deepest extravagance of love. S. T. Stur¹gent says in one of his books, "If you wanted a sweeping accusation to write on the cross of Jesus, this was the only one, 'He loved too much. He was guilty of loving in excess'. This was the only sweeping accusation you could have put on the cross of Calvary."

'He's guilty of loving too much.' And because He was like that, His love opened this lady, she poured everything, and as He looked at the person He said, "Haven't you done too much?" Like Judas. She would have shaken her head and said, "Not a bit. I have not even done 100th of that love. He deserves more than anything I can think of." And in humility she poured everything at His feet, and in absolute abandonment, she was oblivious of who said what, who looked on, who criticised, and this was a life completely liberated. And finally, John says, "The entire house was filled with the fragrance." The entire house. A wonderful life poured at Jesus' feet becomes the possession of the whole world. When life is liberated like that, when it has poured everything it has, used and all, and gifts, and voice and money, at the Master's feet, oh what a beautiful thing.

I wish I had, sometimes I say wishfully, I wish I had twenty-five more lives to live and pour them all at the Master's feet because that is how life can be redeemed. Once you pour your life, no matter how gifted you are; a young African said to a man in my country, he said, "You know, you really are very gifted, but you've wasted your gifts in becoming one who preaches in markets and churches, you should have become a politician. that would have (laughter) really used them. You should then have used your gifts wonderfully." And this brother looked on and he said, "You don't know what you are talking about." When a life is taken and poured at Jesus' feet, it is remade, refilled, re-used, and it becomes the possession of the whole world. And when a life is like that, it is like a lovely perfume spreading all over the country.

Now today, the Holy Spirit can take your life just as it is, you don't have to be wonderful. You don't have to be extra-ordinary. Jesus never uses extra-ordinary people, He takes people from ordinary run of life and

He liberates them, and He forgives them, and He sets them free and then in wondering gratitude they put themselves at His disposal and what a change comes over them. That life can never be empty anymore. It is pouring and pouring and pouring, and the entire house becomes full of fragrance. Westmont can be full of fragrance just because a few students have committed their lives to Jesus Christ. Some of us suffer from putting off. Imagine if Mary had put off? Not now, not now, not today, another day. Or perhaps Judas is going to be critical. "I am going to be reserved today, there is a sentimental woman in the house, therefore I'd better wait for a better atmosphere." When will that atmosphere come?

Now, there are many people who don't know, you can miss the opportunity. There is a time when a decision has to be made even if Judas may criticise. Calculatingly, that which has been poured should have been sold for much more money to help the poor, miserable. John says it was not because he cared, it was that because he was so mean, his was not a love it was a disappointment. Mary poured at the right time, and Jesus said, "Don't bother her. She has done the most beautiful thing." Today, you can do the most beautiful thing if you simply allow the Holy Spirit to take your life as it is and pour it at the Master's feet like a perfume. Let Him take over, let your life be that perfume which is going to be felt, and smelt, and found, and known, and experienced by the people around you. And that perfume, even Judas who objected actually smelled it. When life is liberated like that even your critics become aware there is something true although they don't like it. This is always the case.

It was the case in Jerusalem, it is the case all over the world, when christians are set free and they put their lives and their money, and their gifts of voice and intellect at the Master's feet for the world, and they

become the possession of the entire world, the universe begins to become aware there is a fragrance somewhere. And you know, instead of the smelly smogs of hate, and fumes of desire and twisted lust, If only liberated life can move and the world can really catch the fragrance, what a change. Jesus came, and because He came, He could change poisoned, gaseous life into perfumed life. Life which refresh each other, life which liberates each other and today can be your decision my dear friends in Christ. As you, like Mary, whatever you have in the job, in the class, in your head, in your heart, affections, desires, put at His disposal that like a perfume they may liberate others for Jesus Christ.

The world of America, the world of Africa, the world of India, the world of China, the entire world where men and ^o women are struggling in the fumes of human existence, He is waiting for you. If you love Jesus will you pour everything at His feet? Will the Holy Spirit take back the message today? Yes, He has done it. Yes, He has done it. Today, her life, her hair, her the whole thing, like Jane, cut off your hair and sell it for Jesus. Like Jim, take your watch and sell it for Jesus. For Jesus paid the tremendous price to make you the person you are and He held back nothing at all. God remained empty handed when He gave you His beloved Son, and you remain - not empty handed - but full for when you give what you have Jesus becomes the fullness of your life. Let us pray.

Prayer: Our God we now come to you this morning, we have our lives here, they are the very precious things we have. We may not have dollars, we may not have much reputation, but at least we have a life and this is the first thing we want to pour at your feet in wondering love and gratitude. Help these young people to get to know life becomes full, life becomes perfect only when it is put at the Master's use for a waiting world. For Jesus' sake. Amen.