

Last week I noted that no other image has come closer to describing the character of God, in my humble opinion, than the waiting father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). The father in the parable is peering down the road longing for the wayward son's return. Then upon seeing him the father springs to his feet and runs to meet him with an embrace and kiss. The father, we are told, is moved by compassion and his joy carried him down the road to embrace his wayward son. I noted that this is good news for each of us that have done that which is wrong or disappointing in the eyes of God Almighty. God has compassion upon us. God is not about finding our faults. God is about forgiving us and giving each of us a new start.

The type of compassion and care seen in the father is something that Jesus demonstrated in his actions repeatedly. He lived a life filled with a lavish love. Our gospel lesson today tells us about an extravagant response to the lavish love of Jesus.

In the home of Lazarus, in Bethany, a dinner party was being held in the honor of Jesus. Mary approaches Jesus as everyone is gathering for the dinner. Do you remember Mary? She is one who sits at the feet of Jesus to learn from him as her sister Martha is in the kitchen preparing food (Luke 10:38-42). Martha and Mary are sisters of Lazarus who is hosting the dinner. Once again, Martha is probably in the kitchen mumbling under her breath about the lack of help she is getting from Mary. Where is Mary? She is approaching Jesus with costly perfume. She is overwhelmed with the many expressions of lavish love she sees in the words and actions of Jesus and she wants to express her gratitude. Let's look at John 12:3 again.

“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.”

This is quite a sensual act in a private setting, much less a public setting. Mary takes hold of the feet of Jesus. She rubs and massages the feet of this one she has seen walk mile after mile as he teaches people about the love of God. With her long flowing hair Mary gently wipes off the feet of one who anticipates walking down a path that most others would avoid at all costs. Mary's actions are an extravagant response to the lavish love she has seen expressed by Jesus. It is clear that the days of Jesus' might be numbered and therefore Mary doesn't miss this opportunity to express her love to Jesus.

Last Sunday I asked us to pause as we reflected on the compassionate and forgiving spirit of the Waiting Father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Pause and let the message sink in. God's nature is sheer and all-encompassing grace. Let that sink in. Mary did let it sink in. Then she provided an extravagant response to such lavish love as she poured perfume on the feet of Jesus.

What are our extravagant responses? We cannot pour perfume on the feet of Jesus like Mary did because he is not physically in our midst. Yet, Jesus did say that whenever we give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, welcome to the stranger, clothes to the naked, care for the sick, or visit the imprisoned we do it to him (Matthew 25:40). One expression of extravagant response to the lavish love of God is mission work. What we do to meet the needs of others we do to Jesus. It is like pouring our perfume on his feet.

The second Wednesday of each month a handful our people from our congregation serve a meal to those in need at the Gathering Place which is located at 15<sup>th</sup> and E streets just south of the State Capitol building. That captures the spirit of an extravagant response to God's lavish love. You are welcome to join any month, just contact Linda Steiner in our congregation who has been doing it for twenty years.

We have a couple of members that prepare the meal and with others serve it to those a Matt Talbot located 2121 N. 27<sup>th</sup> Street once a month. That captures the spirit of an extravagant response to God's lavish love.

Twice a year our Mission Committee hosts a cleaning and sorting day at the People City Mission Outlet Store located at 26<sup>th</sup> and O Street. We vacuum the floors, sort donations and place them on the shelves and do whatever else is needed so the store is ready for the customers later in the day. It is a store that is free to all who shop there so they can make ends-meet. Our next visit there is April 30<sup>th</sup>, Saturday morning, 9-11, let the church office know if you would like to be part of this expression of an extravagant response to God's lavish love.

Mentors in the Teammates program meet with a student once a week. The conversations in the midst of activities that the students choose can be difference makers. Over twenty-five years the Teammates program has demonstrated improvements in social and academic outcomes of the students that meet with a mentor once a week. The value of mentoring was captured in a video that closed out a Teammates Training session I attended last week at Bellevue University. I invite you to find it on YouTube. It is entitled, "Every kid is one caring adult away from being a success story." Teammates capture the spirit of an extravagant response to God's lavish love. New mentors will be needed next fall for the Teammates program here in Waverly. If you would like to explore that possibility just contact Sarah Harms, a member of our church, as she the Chair of the Teammates Board here in School District 145.

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Sometimes we pay for the perfume and let others pour it out.

Think about Heidi Buell. She was living a good life in Indianapolis. As a C.P.A. she had a good job and a nice circle of friends. Yet, as she reflected on God's lavish love in her life she thought her response might be greater than it was through what she did in the church she attended and the community it served. She explored a more extravagant response. As a young adult and single she knew she had unique flexibility in her life that allowed her to look at dedicating time on the international mission field. She is now in her second year serving as a missionary in Honduras. That is an extravagant response to the lavish love of God in her life. Most of us do not have the flexibility in our lives to go on the mission field but we can provide Heidi with financial support. If you want to know more about Heidi please read her column in monthly newsletter or talk with her Mom and Dad who just returned from a visit in Honduras.

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Did you know that we have something called the Family Assistance Fund here at our church? It is a fund that I, as pastor, can draw on when someone visits me with a small financial crisis. Usually it is a need to help pay a utility bill, rent, or gas money. I have an internal guideline that I follow when giving out such funds. If the individual can demonstrate that they are able to pay their utility bill, rent or whatever the need is on a regular basis in the future then I am happy to help in the present crisis. If not, we explore other options for their present and future needs. You help me bridge the gap for a family in crisis when you provide write out a check to our church for the Family Assistance Fund.

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Please let me share one more example. I am excited about our Summer Mission Trip. Twelve of us are signed up to attend. We will travel to Chicago on June 4<sup>th</sup>. We will stay at Euclid Avenue United Methodist Church and worship with them on June 5<sup>th</sup>. That afternoon we will travel downtown to tour Pacific Garden Mission. This is the oldest and largest homeless shelter in Chicago. After the tour we will serve a meal for the single

men, clean up the dining hall and then serve a meal for the women and children and clean up. On Monday we will tour and volunteer at Circle Urban Ministries. It is where Marjorie worked for twelve years in the 80's and 90's. We will help with some building maintenance and then do some tutoring in their after school program. On Tuesday we will visit First United Methodist Church in the Chicago Loop and tour their Chapel in the Sky before we return to Pacific Garden Mission to serve the evening meal. On Wednesday we will distribute food to the community at the Food Pantry of Cornerstone Ministry on the north side Chicago before we serve lunch to the residents of their homeless shelter. That afternoon we will visit a Greek Orthodox Church and the iconic Fourth Presbyterian Church on Michigan Avenue. On Thursday we will unload food trucks for the Lakeview Food Pantry and then visit the Bahai Temple along with the United Methodist Seminary, both in Evanston. On Friday we will unload more food trucks before enjoying the museums downtown for the afternoon and evening. The group will do a lot of service work, learn about issues of poverty as well as the work of the church universal. You may not be able to come on the Mission Trip but once again when you make out a check to our church and note it is for the Summer Mission trip that is a difference maker.

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