

Extravagant Worship (or, "Crazy Love")

Mark 14:1-11

Introduction: One newsletter that I read always has a December issue with a cover article, "*Your Ten most important moves...*" for the new year. The idea is, that even small changes, if we can integrate them into our lives and our routine, can make a big difference over time. Really, it is just another take on the idea of "New Year's Resolutions." Most of us begin a new year with good intentions, but by President's Day (or maybe even MLK day!) half of those resolutions have fallen by the wayside! What is your top priority for 2019? If you were to make a "Top Ten" list for the new year, would any of those resolutions impact your spiritual life? That same newsletter began its "Top Ten" article with a quotation from the late Eugene Peterson,

"The main difference between Christians and others is that we take God seriously and they do not. We really do believe that He is the central reality of all existence..."
 [And so,] "...we order our lives in response to that reality and not some other..." (A Long Obedience, quoted in *Sound Mind Investing*, Dec. 2018).

I heard a sermon by a well-known pastor this week lamenting the fact that he had gone for his annual physical, and, to his chagrin, his height was 5 feet and ten inches. The problem was that last year he was 5' 10 ½"! He had lost a half inch in height! He was shrinking! He then made the point that physically speaking, that will happen, it is pretty much inevitable. But what about spiritually? Have you plateaued in your spiritual life, or even worse, are you shrinking? Even into old age, we can, and we should, continue to grow. At the heart of spiritual growth, is to know Christ more intimately, because to know Him is to love Him. What would it look like in our lives, in our church, and in our community, if together we really determined to love the Lord with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength? Can we really give our best to the Master? Will we? As we return to our series in Mark, we'll see in our passage today, an example of whole-hearted devotion to Christ.

The *Maine Idea:** Whole-hearted love for Christ is a proper response from a heart taken captive by the love of God, and by the awareness of how much we have been forgiven.

The Context: Passover had arrived, and the leaders were planning to kill Jesus at an opportune time (1-2).

It was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth and kill him, for they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar from the people."

Being the shortest of the Gospels, Mark may not get the attention of the other accounts of the life of Jesus, but he is an inspired story-teller. Once again Mark

serves us a literary “sandwich” as he has the “bread” of the treachery of the leaders (vv. 1-2) and Judas (vv. 10-11) surround the “meat” of an exemplary act of devotion, even worship, as an unnamed woman pours out on Jesus what must have been a treasured possession (3-9). We looked at the first two verses back in November before we began our Advent series. We saw that Jesus came as the Passover-King, the Lamb on the throne, who alone could shield us, by His blood, from the wrath we deserve. Now, as we return to the Gospel, Passover is at hand, and the evil intentions of leaders are coming front and center in the story.

But Jesus will be no victim. He came willingly, to give His life so that we could be reconciled to God. That is how God showed His love among us (I Jn 4:9). God the Son giving His life for sinful humans. How do we respond? Wholehearted love for Christ is a proper response from a heart taken captive by the love of God, and by the awareness of how much we have been forgiven.

The Setting: 14:1 begins, “*And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper...*” We know from the parallel account in John that when this happened in the house in Bethany, Mary, Martha and Lazarus were present (see John 12:1ff). Mark gives us an additional detail, mentioning the house of “*Simon the leper.*” For a dinner party on the eve of high holy day to be happening there, we must assume that Simon was a *former* leper, perhaps someone who had been healed by Jesus. Was he the father of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, or just a friend and neighbor in who’s house they all gathered? We are reminded by the mention of “leprosy” of why Jesus came. All is not right in the world. Since the Fall, sickness, spiritual separation, the consequences of sin are all around us. He came to undo the Fall, to make possible the reconciliation of fallen humans with Holy God. *By His stripes, we are healed*, spiritually, and one day, physically. That is grace that requires a response! Whole-hearted love for Christ is a proper response from a heart taken captive by the love of God, and by the awareness of how much we have been forgiven.

I. The Devotion of a woman: Extravagant, Crazy, or Whole-hearted devotion (3)?

...as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head...

Some of you will recognize in the alternative title of the sermon the title of the best-selling book by Francis Chan, *Crazy Love*. He tries in that book to give us a glimpse of the majesty of God, and the wonder that such an awesome God would so love us. When we try to describe God we use words like “omniscient” (all-knowing) and “omnipotent” (all-powerful) so casually we are hardly impacted by what we are saying. The Hubble telescope now has expanded our view of the universe,

“astronomically.” Billions of galaxies? I can’t even think about numbers like that. The God who made all of that, who spoke it all into existence, knows my name? And loves me? He even knew me from before the foundation of the world? *Can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior’s blood? Died He for me who caused His pain, for me who him to death pursued?* You get the idea? How should we respond to Him? Listen to David’s heart in Psalm 63:1-7,

O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. ² So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. ³ Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. ⁴ So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands. ⁵ My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips, ⁶ when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; ⁷ for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy.

That is the kind of love and devotion that this unnamed woman seems to express in Mark 14. From the other gospels we can conclude that this was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. She takes this precious possession, a sealed flask of precious perfume, something worth a year’s salary for a day-laborer, so valuable that it was perhaps a family heirloom, and she breaks it open, and pours it over the head and body and feet of Jesus. We don’t have any information about her motives, no explanation of this extravagant, seemingly worshipful act. From John’s Gospel we know what this family has seen and heard of Jesus. Lazarus was dead and buried, four days in the grave, and Jesus raised Him to life! Jesus said on that occasion, “*I am the resurrection and the life...*” “I AM?” He had used that phrase before! And who has power over life and death? Could it be that she was grasping something about who Jesus is, and even why He came?

And so, she did what she could, she gave Him her best. And John tells us that when she poured out the perfume, the house was filled with the aroma. Everyone knew what she had done. We’ll see that not everyone understood her motives. Whole-hearted love for Christ is a proper response from a heart taken captive by the love of God, and by the awareness of how much we have been forgiven.

II. The Dullness of those at the table: Or, a pragmatic concern (4-5)?

There were some who said to themselves indignantly, "Why was the ointment wasted like that? ⁵ For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor." And they scolded her.

We are not told by Mark who those were who were indignant at the wasteful action of the woman—just some who were there at the table. John gives the detail that one who took exception was Judas (we know *his* motives [cf. Jn 12:6!]), but since Mark says “some” it seems likely that some of the other disciples had the same reaction! They were just trying to be practical, right? After all, think of all the good that could have been done had the unopened flask been sold, and the proceeds used to help the poor. They were indignant! What a waste! Or was it? What would we give to Jesus? Would we give Him our lives, willingly putting Him and His mission ahead of our comfort and security?

Some of those who were raising objections were being practical, perhaps, at least from a human perspective. The Bible says a lot about the poor and about the need for showing compassion and seeking to help. After all, giving to the poor is one way of giving to God. So, this expensive perfume, poured out all at once on the teacher seemed wasteful. Couldn't it have been put to better use? If He was just a teacher, they probably would have been right.

Who is Jesus, after all? Who was this rabbi who reclined at table with them? They still didn't understand—not even the disciples (at least not fully). Oh, they had moments when they were almost there it seems, when they were getting a glimpse of His messianic identity. But what did that mean? They still did not understand fully His identity, His dual nature as the God-Man. This was the great I AM reclining at table, God the Son, the Word made flesh, the Redeemer, our promised Rescuer, our Creator. God, incarnate! If they had understood, would any act of devotion to Him seemed too extravagant, too extreme, too “crazy”? Wholehearted love for Christ is a proper response from a heart taken captive by the love of God, and by the awareness of how much we have been forgiven.

III. The Direction of Jesus: *Leave her alone, she has done a beautiful thing (6-9)!*

⁶ But Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. ⁷ For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me. ⁸ She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial. ⁹ And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her."

“Leave her alone, why do you trouble her...” Remember when the parents were bringing their children to Jesus for blessing, and the disciples tried to stop them? Jesus' response: *let them come, don't forbid them!* Here this act of devotion, this response of worship, seems too extreme, too extravagant to some. And so, they are

indignant about the waste. But if they really understood who it was that reclined at the table with them, would anything be too extravagant?

Jesus says, *“She has done a beautiful thing to me...”* There will be ample time and opportunity to do good to the poor. But Jesus would not always be there, at least not physically. The time of His departure was fast approaching. Jesus says, *“She has anointed my body for burial...”* He had been telling His followers repeatedly that He would soon be betrayed, handed over, and put to death. But even His closest disciples didn’t seem to understand what He was talking about. That day was drawing near. It is not clear if Mary understood what would soon happen, but in effect, Jesus said this anointing was for His burial. It does seem she had begun to grasp that this Jesus was more than a prophet and teacher. He has more than a “son of David.” This “crazy love,” this extravagant worship, was offered to Him who was, and is, the Son of God. So, she gave Him her best, perhaps her most precious and cherished possession. She broke open the flask.

Jesus made a point of saying that this woman’s act of devotion would be recounted, told over-and-over again through the ages, in her memory. The idea seems to be that this is what devotion to Christ should look like... total commitment. Think of who He is, and what He came to do. Whole-hearted love for Christ is a proper response from a heart taken captive by the love of God, and by the awareness of how much we have been forgiven.

IV. The Decision of Judas: the last straw (10-11)?

¹⁰ Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. ¹¹ And when they heard it, they were glad and promised to give him money. And he sought an opportunity to betray him.

We are not told by Mark that there was a specific connection, but you can’t miss how the woman’s action, and the words Jesus, led immediately to Judas going to the religious leaders with his plan to betray Jesus. As the fragrance of the costly perfume filled the room, it seems a stench, teachery, welled up in the heart of Judas. This was the last straw. Judas goes out to chief priests. Think of the contrast! The beautiful act of devotion by Mary, the fragrance filling the house, and the lack of understanding from others at the table, and worse, the evil in the heart of Judas. But God had a plan. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 2:14-16,

¹⁴ But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. ¹⁵ For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who

are perishing, ¹⁶ to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?

For three years Judas had walked with Jesus and the other disciples. He had heard the teaching. He had seen the miracles. Still, it seems, Jesus did not live up to his expectations. Instead of worship, as expressed by Mary, it seems Judas' disappointment leads to rejection and betrayal. Judas' unbelief is exposed. Among those who are perishing, a fragrance of death to death. But some hear the truth and believe, and His Word, and our testimony of His grace, becomes to them a fragrance of life to life! Remember the response of Michal as David danced and celebrated as the Ark was brought into the city (2 Sam 6)? She despised him. We shouldn't judge the heart of another worshipper. After all...

What is God saying to me in this passage? Wholehearted love for Christ is a proper response from a heart taken captive by the love of God, and by the awareness of how much we have been forgiven.

What would God have me to do in response to this passage? It may be a good exercise to think about, maybe even write down, your top five or ten "moves" for the new year. Resolutions about fitness and diet are good things, and probably most of us could do a little better in those areas, but what about your spiritual life? The apostle Paul said "*...for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come...*" (1 Tim 4:8, ESV). One of the best ways we can grow spiritually is to intentionally spend time in the Word. I would recommend adopting a reading program that can guide you through the Bible in a systematic way.

Monday night we'll read aloud the Book of Revelation – I think it takes us about an hour and a half or so? No preaching, no commentary. We will sing! We have some reading plans in the back of the church that will take you through the Bible in a year – in about 15 minutes a day. If you miss a day just pick up where you left off. No pressure! Is that too extravagant? After a while, you'll really look forward to it—and over time, you'll realize that your relationship with God is deepening, you are coming to know Him better. To know Him is to love Him. Let's seek Him in 2018. Let's give our best to the Master. Crazy love—He has shown us what it looks like. A Roman scourge. A crown of thorns. A Cross. *I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. Amen.*