

Provisions for the Journey: Extravagance

Fifth Sunday of Lent

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Text: John 12:1-8

Big news this week – did you hear?... “Habemus Papam!” – ‘we have a Pope’ – the white smoke poured from the Vatican: “Habemus Papam”. There was some other news too, but just when you think maybe that you or your congregation has big news, the global 24-hour coverage of a new Pope, Francis the 1st, leader of over 1 billion Catholics, puts things in a bit of perspective. Our little Reformed tradition has nothing like it. I was able to watch the initial appearance by Pope Francis, and found his wise words and humble spirit to be very moving – and I was moved too by the spectacle of it: the crowds and cheers, the pomp and ceremony, the traditions and symbols. And I ask for your prayers to join mine for God’s blessing for Pope Francis and for our Catholic sisters and brothers. Such blessing is most appropriate for us protestants to do – although, the observation that I am about to make is probably not the best idea – so don’t you do it, just watch me. Because for purposes of this sermon, I want to make this observation: part of the significance with the new Pope was the name the Pope chose – Francis – the 1st one! – the first time a Pope chose that name, taken from St. Francis of Assisi, the remarkable 13th century preacher known for his profound compassion for the poor. This is a powerful statement from the Pope, as leader of the church to take a name that puts him in solidarity with the poor – the billions of poor and hungry people in our world today. And yet, there the Pope stands, in the splendor of the Vatican – surrounded by opulent grandeur – the material wealth of the church plain for all to see. So, one

could ask – should not all this be sold and given to the poor? – who knows much money it could bring and how much good it could do?

Hmm – when I ask that, do I sound like any one you know? Um-hm – sounds like Judas. As a general rule, it is not good to sound like Judas, because he is always a bad example in the gospels. But I do sound like Judas, and I have to say, that he and I are a lot alike – I, like him, am quite good at questioning the choices that other people make about money...and not so good at doing so with myself. So in that spirit, I am going to avoid self-reflection, and like Judas focus on Mary instead. Mary takes a pound of costly perfume and pours it on Jesus' feet, wiping it with her hair – she does so tenderly and beautifully...but the extravagant expense! Judas is indignant – think of all the good we could have done for the poor! Now the gospel writer clues us in on what a hypocritical snake Judas is, so that we can dismiss what he says. But let's not – because Judas is right! Isn't this question Judas asks in some way always right? – what Judas asks can be asked about just about anything we spend or do or have... 'why wasn't this given to the poor?' Let's just acknowledge that, for the record, Judas is right.

But Jesus says: 'leave her alone' – Jesus declares what Mary has done, good. 'The poor you always have with me, but not always me...leave her alone' – Jesus enjoys the beauty of what is done for him, and declares it good.

'Provisions for the Journey: Word – Trust – Feast – Forgiveness' and today 'Extravagance' – extravagance? A peculiar word to choose for a Lenten theme; a peculiar word to portray in a positive light – I'm not sure just how extravagance strikes you when you hear it, but I did check and the primary definition of the word touches on the negative: 'excessive - unnecessary – wasteful'. Extravagance is too

much – unseemly - irresponsible. But we are here today to redeem the word extravagance – to see the beauty possible in extravagance; a hearing of extravagance that allows us to see that while Judas is right, Jesus is wise; to see that while Judas states the facts, Jesus speaks the truth.

This story is about extravagance, and the word is redeemed when we hear it in the sense that our preacher last week, Paige, spoke about the word ‘prodigal’ – prodigal as a kind of lavish abundance that can be seen in forgiveness, in grace, in generosity. It is an extravagance that fully declares/reveals/affirms/portrays the goodness and beauty and life. Judas focuses on the excessive cost – Jesus speaks to the extravagance of Mary’s love and devotion; Judas focuses on the waste of perfume – the story focuses on the extravagance of God’s love that will be shown in Jesus’ death. We claim extravagance as a faith provision when our hearts are claimed by the abundance of who God is and the fullness of life that God intends for all – extravagance is to claim the beauty and goodness of life.

Ok – eloquent enough – but what about the poor? And would you guess that I am going to say that is a very good and difficult question? – and that I’ll say I can’t give a complete answer? You’re right about that, but let me also say this: one of the most persistently perverse conclusions drawn from this story is that when Jesus says ‘you always have the poor with you’, that Jesus means ‘you don’t need to care about the poor.’ That is not at all what Jesus is saying - in fact what is going on is that Jesus knows his Hebrew Scriptures. And when Jesus says ‘you always have the poor with you’ he is making a reference to Deuteronomy 15:11 –

Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.”

Jesus is saying a remarkable thing: that a faithful heart is always aware of and seeking to respond to the needs of this world – the always present, often overwhelming, never-fully-met need in a broken world; AND also saying that one does this in the midst of life – one does this making choices all of the time about what you have and how to use it. In this story, I would assert that Mary has a heart for the poor, AND she chooses to anoint Jesus' feet with costly perfume – and we are told it is good. And I would assert that we must have the same heart for the poor and make the same choices about using what we have – only we do not have the immediate feedback on of whether the choices we make are good or not...which makes things complicated.

It is tough stuff – no need to talk about the Pope in the Vatican...here I am in a fine pulpit in a beautiful church – here we are warm and clothed and fed – here we will collect money for our ministry; then we will drive from here in cars and go to homes, and that is just the start of it... couldn't this all have been sold and given to the poor? Isn't this all extravagance in the un-redeemed sense?

Those questions are right – they are right to ask – and we ask them with these 2 truths from Jesus: *there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land."* and 'leave her alone – what she has done is good'. We live in the prodigal need of a broken world and with the extravagant beauty of life – we have faith in an extravagant God who desires the ways of life: food and shelter – and beauty and goodness - for all.

A lot of news this week – Habemus Papam! for the Catholic church; charges made against this church; news of war and hunger, news of justice and hope; private

suffering, shared grief – love shared and life enjoyed. It's the news of each week in its own way – of our lives - and it is why we gather here each week not to live just in the light of the news but to hear the good news – to live in the light of such an extravagance that only God can give: a heart for the poor, and a heart for beauty – a life of giving and a life of love – a faith that worships and a faith that follows. It is the good news of the extravagant love of God that we prepare to hear again in the holy weeks ahead, and to join our hearts to always.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.