



**Extravagant Love**  
**John 12:1-8**  
**April 7, 2019**

Prayer of Illumination: Stir in us now, Holy Spirit, a willingness to hear, the desire to know the truth and the courage to follow in joyful obedience, that we may be formed by your word into women and men of faith. Amen.

Read John 12:1-8

When I was in my early 30s, I was a leader in a Bible Study for singles called Bible Study Fellowship. 300 singles in their 20s and 30s attended this intensive study that required regular attendance. (There was a waiting list for women, so if you missed 3 weeks in a row, you were out). There was homework. If you didn't do your lesson, you couldn't talk in your small group.

I was a leader of a small group. The leaders all got together a couple days ahead of the big Bible study and went through the lesson before we taught it to our small group. Women leaders were required to wear dresses, even in the middle of a cold Minnesota winter night. This was serious stuff! And I loved it.

The purpose of this singles Bible study was, of course, to help singles study the Bible. But there also was another ulterior motive – it was a place for single Christian women and men to meet each other. They had a pretty good track record.

I had platonic friendships with several of the men leaders. One day, one of them said to me, "You are so involved with this study that the guys don't know if you are interested in them." I was indignant. I said, "I am here to study God's word, not look for a guy!"

It was then I realized I was different from most women.

My singleness became an extravagant gift of love to God. And it turned into something I never expected. God turned my dedication to God into becoming a pastor even though I was taught growing up I could not be a spiritual leader in the church.

In our passage today, a woman gives an extravagant gift of love to Jesus, and it turns into something she never imagined.

Jesus is invited to the home of Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha. While they are having dinner, Mary does something extraordinary and unexpected. She takes an expensive perfume, pours the perfume over Jesus' feet and wipes his feet with her hair.

Can you picture it? Can you smell the perfume? Even John noticed it. "And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume."

You need to understand the unusualness or unexpectedness of this act of Mary's. First, the expense. It was worth a year's salary. It was an extravagant act, misunderstood by those there. As Judas says, "What a waste."

Why did Mary "waste" this perfume? The clue comes in the previous chapter. Jesus had raised Mary's brother, Lazarus, from the dead. Can you imagine the emotions of having a beloved one dead for 4 days and then alive? Filled with turmoil and awe and fear and wonder, Mary is extraordinarily grateful for what Jesus did. She expresses that gratitude through a wasteful, extravagant act of love to Jesus.

Have you ever offered anything wasteful, extravagant to God to show your love?

Not only did Mary waste a whole bottle of perfume, the way Mary did it was unusual and unexpected. The act itself of anointing someone back then wasn't unusual. To anoint the head of a guest was a sign of respect, but only a few drops of oil was used. If one poured lavish amounts of oil on the head (not the feet), this was the kind of anointing that was considered sacred, reserved for designating someone as a king or priest, marking that person for divine service.

Is this what Mary was doing? Did she really know who Jesus was?

To make it worse, women don't anoint men. Only men anoint men.

It doesn't get any better: that unbinding of the hair. That is reserved for the bedroom between a husband and wife. Mary's intimate action is astounding, embarrassing, and uncomfortable for those witnessing it. Maybe that is why Judas responded so vehemently; he was uncomfortable with that act of love when in his heart he was contemplating an act of betrayal.

I can imagine what those in the room are thinking: Is there something going on between Mary and Jesus? Of course there is. Mary is in love with the God who loves her with an extravagant love.

This is the act by which Mary comes to be known. When John introduces her for the first time in his Gospel (see John 11:2), he says, "You know, the woman who washed Jesus' feet with perfume and wiped it with her hair." By the time John writes his Gospel, Mary is apparently famous for this extravagant act of love. And John recorded it so we can know of it today.

As Mary anoints Jesus, she is rudely interrupted by Judas. Jesus rises to Mary's defense and says her act prepares him for the day of his burial, a common practice in that time.

We don't know if Mary knew that what she was doing, preparing Jesus for his burial. I don't think she did. I believe it was Jesus taking her extravagant act of love and turning into an act of burial, making it more sacred than she could even imagine.

God takes our acts of service and makes them more sacred than we could ever imagine. God takes our extravagant gifts of love and turns them into something unexpected. When you offer a listening ear to the troubled, a prayer for the sick, extended communion to the homebound, food for the poor, you offer them the gift of God's extravagant love. God takes it, and makes it sacred.

Six days after this meal and Mary's act of love, Jesus carries out a foot washing with his disciples at that last meal. I wonder: was he thinking of Mary's act of anointing his feet, expressing her extravagant love? Because as Jesus washes his disciples feet, he says: "Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (13:34).

I wonder if those disciples were watching Jesus working on their feet and remembering Mary bending over Jesus' feet like that. Mary had acted out Jesus' last, new commandment to love one another before he ever said it.

Jesus had taken Mary's extravagant gift of love and turned it into something sacred. He turned it into preparation for his burial. He turned it into a new commandment to his disciples. Extravagantly love one another as I have extravagantly loved you.

Extravagant love. Willingly giving to Jesus the best of what we have.

How will you demonstrate that back to the One who loves you more than you will ever know? And when you do, God will turn it into something unexpected and sacred.