

# Responding To Our Spirits' Cries

Preached by

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United Church of Fayetteville

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Fifth Sunday in Lent

**For Reflection** *"An extravagance is something that your spirit thinks is a necessity."*

Bernard Williams

**Hebrew Scripture Reading:** *Isaiah 43:16-21*

Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters,<sup>17</sup> who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:<sup>18</sup> Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.<sup>19</sup> I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.<sup>20</sup> The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people,<sup>21</sup> the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

**Gospel Reading:** *John 12:1-8*

<sup>1</sup>Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup>There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup>"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" <sup>6</sup>(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) <sup>7</sup>Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup>You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

**Meditation:** *Responding to Our Spirits' Cries*

Making gestures and giving gifts is such a fraught enterprise. I remember a *Big Bang Theory* episode where we are introduced to the complexity of Sheldon's thinking about gifts: matching another's gift in value, being unsure what another will like, so getting something for himself instead, like, the risks of not getting a gift for someone who gave one to him. The iterations are endless and it is little wonder Sheldon doesn't give gifts. It's funny because it's supposed to be. It's also funny because most of us share the experiences and tensions around gift-giving, even if we are not bold enough to give up on it altogether. It's a wonder we haven't.

There is not just interpersonal giving, but giving for causes and concerns, (as we did this is day when we dedicated our special offering for humanitarian needs in Ukraine). There is the debate about public and private gestures of encouragement, support or faithfulness. Christians tend to fall into the category of those who say giving should be a private thing—a demonstration of humility rather than fear of judgement about our giving. Yet, very few object to what, in the public sphere, are now called "naming rights" if the gifts are large enough, or plaques in memory or honor of donors. Where do we

draw the line between generous giving and ostentatious giving—giving so that others will be impressed? It's a fine and always moving line. I am not suggesting any of those perspectives are wrong (or right, for that matter) but rather that we fool ourselves if we think even charitable giving is straightforward and without complexity.

And, as we see with a woman with a bottle of expensive perfume, one of the key complications of giving is not merely the tension of personal decision making, but the high likelihood that our giving or gesture will be judged and most likely found wanting, or evidence of poor choices or weak witness. We (make no mistake, we are often the "they" who) make these judgements while knowing nothing or very little about someone else's resources, other charitable giving, financial commitments, personal journeys or passions. We make these judgements as though the resources being used were ours to make decisions about and not someone else's. We make these judgements as though our judgement is better than the judgement of others.

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As has been mentioned before, Lent is a time for self-examination and self-reflection, so we will turn our attention to that, not the woman's giving or even Judas' judging. Rather, in Lent, this text invites us to examine our own giving, the reasons for our giving, and reserve our judging for self alone.

We are called to give generously as our God has been generous and openhanded with us. We are called to give sacrificially as our Lord has sacrificed for us. It would be foolish to say our Lord didn't count the cost of the cross to himself before giving himself up to it. Almost all of our Holy Week readings reflect his awareness of that cost. But for Christ, the gift was worth the cost.

We explore personal cost and gift when we engage Lenten practices such as giving something up for the season. It can be most effective when we tie it to giving—the cost of sacrifice. Give up Starbucks? Give what you would have spent on latte for mission efforts. Add an exercise of gratitude? Assign some value to each day of gratitude and in gratitude, give something away. Even though we are more than half way through the season, if you haven't tried something like that, it's not too late for the experience. It's an opportunity to give, borne of the most faithful of responses to God's giving—gratitude. Our gifts may be large or small—and will likely be based on our other commitments and measures of what we can afford.

For the most part, that's okay, but this text also invites us to moments of extravagance—more than we can "afford." An expensive bottle of perfume used for solemn ritual no doubt represented a large portion of a poor woman's resources. It was not a gift she could make often and it no doubt cost her something—perhaps even meals—to make a gift of it on that occasion. She felt compelled, for reasons we do not know, to make this gift—acknowledging that she knew where Jesus was headed and would follow and serve him anyway—even though it was becoming clearer to everyone, he was no one's idea of what a Messiah should be.

This story invites us to an open-handed lack of restraint in response to the world's cries and our own spirits' yearnings. Such moments are not every day moments and don't shape all of our giving, but they should certainly inspire some of it. In some moments, we should surrender the metrics of affordability and open our hands as our hearts and spirits have been touched, moved, even wounded by a need, critical or chronic. Such times may be in moments of disaster (wildfires or wars) or may be connected to causes or needs which haunt us in the day or the night (people in this nation go to bed hungry or under bridges) or an acute awareness that we have some privilege others do not (a vote, an education...). At such times we need to listen to the cries of our spirits and open our hands, counting the cost, but letting go of the fear that it is too great.

Few, if any of us, will be asked to pay the cost our Lord did. Yet, in those moments when we let go of caution and give away more than we afford, we are likely to discover we get far more in return—in richness of faith, deeper communion with our God, a closer walk with our Lord, strengthened ties with one another and the capacity for transforming ministry in the world. May it be so for us now and in all the days ahead.

## **Invitation to the Table**

Friends: Our Lord counted the cost of this meal and found us worth the price. Because of the extraordinary generosity of God and the sacrifice of our Lord, this Meal has been prepared for us so that we may eat bread without cost and drink the fruit of the vine for which we do not pay. Let us share in this meal which has been set before us. Come to the Table, everyone.