



## Extravagant Devotion

Be pondering this as you read this column. Is now the time to make an extravagant, costly display of devotion in gratitude for all God means to you?

In my personal Bible reading I have been looking at a series of individuals in the Gospels where Jesus observes their behavior, stops everything, and says to those nearby, “Do you see what that person just did? If you want to be found faithful, follow their example.” The impoverished widow putting in her temple offering and the centurion who trusts Jesus to heal his servant are two examples.

The woman who anoints Jesus’s head with costly perfume is another. The episode recorded in Matthew 26 takes place in the turmoil of the last week of Jesus’s life. He has already entered Jerusalem. He has spoken to large crowds and riled up the resistance of the religious leaders. There is tension in the air. Indeed, Judas will soon betray him. Jesus has pulled back a couple of miles to the village of Bethany just on the outskirts of Jerusalem. He is staying in the home of Simon the Leper, whom Jesus has healed. And while he is there sharing a meal, a woman comes into the dining area, breaks open an expensive jar of perfume, and pours it onto the hair of Jesus.

The disciples get upset and begin to murmur that this expensive commodity could have been put to better use than to anoint Jesus, notably to help the poor. But Jesus stops the proceedings and says, “Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing.”

In fact he goes on to say, “Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her” (v. 13, NIV). And indeed, here we are talking about it right now.

What is going on here?

What you have is an extravagant display of devotion, way out of scale with what seems reasonable, to the point of seeming even to be irresponsible. Note that her action isn’t being praised as the routine and norm. Jesus is clear to point out that he will not be with them much longer, and this outpouring from the heart only makes sense in the context of the magnitude of the moment. Otherwise, the disciples’

concern would be spot on. Unmistakably, helping the poor and addressing the causes of poverty are an imbedded, ongoing priority of what Jesus calls us to do. This is not to the neglect of that priority.

But the point is this: there *are* times when exceptional, memorable, extravagant displays are the best tangible way to communicate the depth of devotion, care, and gratitude we feel. Being found faithful is demonstrated not just through faithfulness in the routine, but also in finding those moments of exceptional devotion that can only be expressed in exceptional acts.

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My wife, Nancy, loves quilts. For our twenty-fifth anniversary I arranged for her to meet with an Amish quilt master to design and make an heirloom quality quilt for our bed. Based on the cost I’m not really sure the Amish have taken a vow of poverty.

Now, would I do that every anniversary? No. In fact, unless we make it to our 100th anniversary I’m pretty sure that’s it for quilts. But for twenty-five years of being partners in life in all of its joys, challenges, and complexities, the quilt became a tangible and memorable way to express a depth of thankfulness, affection, and appreciation.

Is this one of those moments for you to express exceptional devotion to God through an exceptional act?

It might be a radical act of service. Or a definitive reordering of priorities. Or, yes, quite literally a material gift. Like the jar, when we break ourselves open in devotion and pour ourselves out, the sweet aroma of the fragrant perfume is released in ways that bless and honor our Lord. When we keep it bottled up, we stunt the very value of what is valuable.

A legacy is what lives on because of the life we live. In this woman, we see that sometimes the legacy of the life we live is framed by the gifts we give. ■

If you are interested in making a gift to the Covenant Church, contact Cynthia Halverson, executive director of advancement, at [cynthia.halverson@covchurch.org](mailto:cynthia.halverson@covchurch.org).

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