

Year C, April 7, 2019  
5 Lent  
Christ Church, Mexia

A vagabond was looking for a handout one day in a picturesque old English village. Hungry almost to the point of fainting, he stopped by a pub bearing the classic name, *Inn of St. George and the Dragon*.

"Please, ma'am, could you spare me a bite to eat?" he asked the lady who answered his knock at the kitchen door. "A bite to eat?" she growled. "For a sorry, no-good bum – a foul-smelling beggar? No!" she snapped as she almost slammed the door on his hand.

Halfway down the lane the tramp stopped, turned around and eyed the words, *St. George and the Dragon*. He walked slowly back and knocked again on the kitchen door. "Now what do you want?" the woman asked angrily. "Well, ma'am, if St. George is in, may I speak with him this time?" (David Augsburger, *The Freedom of Forgiveness*)

We laugh because it is a funny story on the surface, but if we stop to think about it, it isn't really funny that this poor man was treated so shabbily and denied the food he needed. And maybe that sympathetic response makes us want to side with Judas in today's gospel story. Why wasn't the expensive perfume sold and the money used to feed the poor? Of course, the author of John quickly provides an insight into a possible answer to that question – Judas was a thief; he wanted more money in the purse for his benefit. But why does Jesus seemingly take a different approach toward the poor to whom he has always ministered? Why does HE seem to welcome this extravagance towards himself?

We need to examine the story even more closely to be able to answer those questions. The Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, a renowned preacher and retired Episcopal priest, observes that Mary does four remarkable things in the story. First, she lets her hair down in a room full of men; an honorable woman would never have done that in the first century. Then she pours perfume on Jesus' feet – not his head, which would have been the normal way to honor someone. Third, she touches him – a single woman touching a single man, even in the company of family and friends, violates custom and tradition. And then in perhaps the most bizarre act of all, she wipes his feet with her hair. What could have prompted such inexplicable, uncanny behavior?

Rev. Taylor concludes that she was prophetic - and we know from several Bible stories that prophets do seemingly weird things. She also points out that the only time the FEET of a man would receive anywhere near such treatment would be in death - preparation for burial. In fact, the nard she used may have been left over from the burial of Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised not long before this current visit. Thus, she was most likely acting out Jesus' coming death - acting out is another thing associated with prophets.

Yes, the sale of the nard might have provided enough money to possibly feed a poor family for a year - which is not insignificant. But what about Jesus' death? It has saved millions and millions of us and has the power to keep on saving. God's love for us, and what God provides for us every day, is incomprehensible and immeasurable. Mary's supposed extravagance pales in comparison to God's extravagance, and we cannot begin to measure what God has done with our knowledge of economics and/or math.

Charles Swindoll observes, "A gift is a demonstration of love from one heart to another. Calvin Miller once sent me an acrostic poem that spelled out my name. You cherish those special, personal gifts." Maybe Jesus was simply enjoying, cherishing, the gift from someone he loved, and who loved him. Maybe he understood her prophetic act of preparing him for the death to come, and her help in delivering his message about his death to those, who still didn't get it. Maybe he saw in her the fulfillment of the commandment that he had yet to give, "to love one another as I have loved you." How can we know what he was thinking?

But we can know what God has done for us, not only in sending Jesus to be incarnate but in our individual lives as well. Looking back over my life, I can see what was not always evident to me. Even when I had turned my back on God, even when I mocked God at times, God was there waiting patiently for me, watching over me, loving me, giving me chance after chance, until I could finally understand, at least as much as I can, what is really important.

I suppose I could have given the money that I spent on this stole to the poor. We could sell many of the items we use in this church and give the money in support of the poor. We could even close the church and sell the buildings and land and give all the money to the poor. But without the church, I could never have found my way back to God. Without the church I could not worship, we could not worship,

and we could not “offer and present... , our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice” to God in the celebration of the Eucharist – without the church we would lack motivation and have difficulty presenting our gifts to God. And without the church, the poor would be even more neglected and less cared-for than they are now. Some things cannot be accurately measured in dollars and cents.

God certainly doesn’t want us to ignore the poor, to slam the door in their face, as in the opening story. We do need to be good stewards of what God has given us, individually and collectively. We need to care for the poor, and others who are in trouble and need, but sometimes, we need to let our hair down, maybe break tradition – maybe depart from rational economic thought, if only briefly, to show God our love. To thank God for all we have been given. To do something that demonstrates the glory of God to others!

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word, and the Spirit.

Amen.