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March 13, 2016  
John 12:1-8

### **“A Boundary Breaking God-Part 4”**

This Lent we’re looking at how Jesus was a boundary-breaker. Jesus continually defied the logic of his day when he went to places and spent time with people no one ever expected him to go or visit. In fact, I heard someone once say that Jesus didn’t go elsewhere because he was **rejected**, he was rejected **because** he went elsewhere.

Three weeks ago we looked at how we’re called to love people despite the differences we have with them – surely a boundary breaking move in this day and age; two weeks ago we looked at overcoming internal boundaries so that we can endure difficult times; and last week we looked at the story of the Prodigal Son – which has so many boundary breaking moments in it.

Today, we’re going to hit close to home, perhaps a little too close for some of you, and talk about money. Specifically, how we use it; and how re-thinking how we use our money can help to break boundaries.

Three years ago AT&T ran a commercial that began with a question posed to young children. “Who thinks more is better than less?” the narrator asked the kids. Of course, all of them raised their hands. “We want more. We want more!” one young girl said. After a few moments, the advertiser reminded us, “It’s not complicated, more is better.”

We live in a culture where this tends to be the case. Value is placed on getting more in our lives: purchasing a vehicle that gets more gas mileage; having one more item to add to our collection; being more successful than our neighbor. Infomercials draw us in with the line, “But wait! There’s more!”

Whatever good we receive, it seems that we always want more. The young toddler, after experiencing something he enjoys, yells “More!” And as we get older, not much seems to change.

But our story from John's gospel presents us with different understanding of "more," a counter-cultural, boundary-breaking understanding of more -- an understanding of what living with a "more" mentality looks like as a disciple of Christ.

In a spirit of thanksgiving, Martha and Mary give a dinner for Jesus and his disciples as a way of saying "thank you". You might recall that just before this story, Jesus performed the incredible miracle of bringing back to life Lazarus, Mary and Martha's brother. So this dinner must have been an overwhelming moment for this family. How could they possibly thank Jesus for such a miracle? There must be something "more" they can do.

This is when Mary comes forward with her gift – a pound of costly perfume – and liberally pours it on Jesus' feet. It wasn't just a few drops, but a considerable amount of fragrance. In fact, some people say the perfume today would be worth anywhere from \$12,000-\$36,000.

This is a moment of abundance, rich with symbolism. By anointing Jesus, Mary is foreshadowing the events to come, Jesus' own death and the anointing with oil the women are prepared to do on Easter morning. Yet, Mary has taken the "more" to a whole new level, and such a gift would not go unnoticed.

William Carter notes that "nothing begins a conversation like an extravagant gift". It leads us to ask, is there such a thing as too much? Or, when is something "too much"? Too "over the top"? Unnecessary?

That's at the heart of Judas' question; even if the question isn't honest on his part, it still hangs in the air. Why not sell that perfume and give the proceeds to the poor? Isn't that a better use of it? The perfume was worth thousands of dollars. That can help a lot of poor people. Judas has a point, I think. A point that wasn't only appropriate for his time, but our time as well.

What we do with our stuff, our "nard", says a lot about us. Judas implies that Mary's use of her nard was extravagant. Which is another way of saying it was wasteful. Was it? Jesus doesn't seem to think so, and Jesus is always telling us to sell all that we have and give it to the poor. So why is Judas wrong this time (despite his poor motives) and Mary right? Where is the line between wastefulness and generosity, and how do we know when we have crossed it?

What about the dollars that you spend, and that I spend? What about the dollars that the church spends? What does our collective and personal spending say about us? A provocative Old Testament scholar challenged a group of people saying, "I'm not really interested in your story of faith. I want to know about your story with money." And another one has said, "Show me your checkbook, and I will tell you what you believe."

Shouldn't we sell that nard and give it to the poor?

After all, think about how many people could have been fed with what that perfume cost.

Think of the homes that could have been repaired, or the medications provided.

One village in Africa could have received a new well and fresh water.

The food pantry could have been filled.

Perhaps Judas is right to object.

And yet, Jesus doesn't see it that way.

"Leave her alone. She has used this costly perfume rightly to anoint me for burial. You will always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me," he says.

What a strange response after all this time. Surely Jesus doesn't mean for his followers to ignore the needs of the poor. Didn't he say in his first sermon in the Nazareth synagogue that he had come to bring good news to the poor? And didn't he say the nations would be judged on how they cared for the least of his brothers and sisters... and that in caring for them, they were really caring for him? Everything he has taught since the beginning was about making the effort for those on the margins. He is all about attending the poor, building up the weak, embracing the outsiders, breaking boundaries.

He can't mean to exclude them now.

But he didn't say that, did he. What he said is that the poor would always be with us, and therefore we'll always need to reach out to those on the margins. Jesus does not say that there is nothing we can do about poverty, what Jesus says is that poverty will be an eternal challenge. Next to preaching about the poor there

was nothing that Jesus liked to preach on more than money and what we do with it. Jesus was very concerned with what we do with our nard -- our money -- because he knows that how we spend it is a sign of our faithfulness. After all, maybe if Judas had been as generous with his money and possessions as Mary was with hers, there wouldn't be any need to be concerned about the poor because there wouldn't be any poor people.

When Mary pours that precious oil on Jesus, and prepares him for burial, it's not because she doesn't care about the poor or anyone else; it's because she gets it.

Likewise, our caring for the poor doesn't negate our care for Jesus; it's because we love and follow Jesus that we must love the poor among us.

Mary gets that, and Judas doesn't.

And when we're ruled by our self-interests, or withhold our "nard" at the expense of others, we don't get it, either.

Mary is praised for her actions because her love is so extravagant that it knows no cost. I'm sure that Mary herself was poor and could have used that money to buy herself, her sister Martha and her brother Lazarus some food. Instead, she chooses to give all she has to her dear friend. It is a completely selfless love of a woman for her friend, and it foreshadows the utterly selfless love that Jesus has for us. Just as the alabaster flask was broken and poured for him, so he would soon be broken and poured for her.

In just one week we will "celebrate" the "passion" of Christ. It is probably odd to the outside world that we celebrate the death of our savior. But we know-have faith-believe-that the Passion story is, at its very core, a love story. Not a sentimentalized or erotic love story, but a story of demanding love, love of the highest striving, love that knows no cost. It shows us how, as one poet put it so eloquently, "to give and give, and give again, what God hath given thee; to spend thyself nor count the cost; to serve right gloriously."

How, then, can we do the same? How do we share such a selfless love with other people through the things we do and the things we have, and how we spend our money? Our model for such a thing rests in Mary, who knew that her love was not to be kept close to her, hoarded and held for her consumption and hers alone. As the great Protestant preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick pointed out long

ago, “we receive God’s love the way the Sea of Galilee receives it source: the water comes in fresh and clean and wends its way from one end to the other, and then the sea passes it on, emptying itself into the Jordan River. This way, the Galilee remains clean and full of life; because it accepts the water, makes use of it, but then gives it to another.”

Mary risked, she loved and she gave. Whether we do that or not is up to us. But when we give, we do no less than honor God, who walked among us as Christ, and who continues to walk among under the disguise of those who need our help the most. I would hope and pray that we would break open our jars of nard for them and anoint their feet lavishly with that which is most precious to us.

Amen.

Sources:

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