

Sermon for June 12, 2016

Sometimes things that we know so well, such as favorite hymns and Bible verses need to be put in a different context for it to still say something to us. I actually experienced this while on internship with the hymn Silent Night. For most of us we sing this Christmas staple at Christmas programs or during our Christmas Eve worship services. When we sing, “sleep in heavenly peace” with our sanctuaries lit only by our candles and lights from our Christmas trees we picture the heavenly child sleeping in a manger.

But while I was on internship one of our members died right before Christmas; in fact my supervisor and I went to visit with the family on the morning of Christmas Eve. While there we found out that one of the favorite things this family liked to do was to sing Christmas carols around the piano on Christmas Day. So the hymn that we sang after the sermon for John’s funeral was “Silent Night.” The words, “sleep in heavenly peace” take on a whole new meaning when the casket of a loved one is right before us and they become a prayer instead of a lullaby. It also reminds us that the one who was born in a manger will also die for us on a cross giving us the hope of new life for our loved ones and ourselves.

The same thing has been done with our Gospel reading for today. All four of the Gospels record the story of the woman who anoints Jesus with expensive ointment. All record that someone complains about this extravagant act, but one of the writers changes it just a bit to draw us deeper into the story. Usually when one of the stories about Jesus is different from the other three it’s the Gospel of

John that's different. For example John is the only one who has Jesus carrying his cross all the way to Golgotha all by himself. The other three have Simon of Cyrene help Jesus. John is also the only one who has Jesus die the same time the Passover lamb is killed. But this time it's Luke that decides to be different.

Luke is the only one who doesn't place this story of Jesus' life right before his death. Luke doesn't want us to connect this anointing with Jesus' burial. Instead Luke places this story in the house of a Pharisee, mixes in a parable and other teachings and gives us an unforgettable image of the extravagant forgiveness that comes straight from the heart of God.

As I mentioned before one the pieces of this story that all four Gospel writers record is that the ointment used by the woman isn't just expensive, but it was extravagant. It costs so much that those who witnessed this act were so shocked that it stayed in the memory of the church. This same extravagance draws us in and makes us pay attention. And then I started to think; when are we extravagant today, when do we spend a lot of money without complaining.

The first thing that came to my mind was a wedding. Weddings are times when some of us spend thousands of dollars to celebrate the joining of two people into a new family. It's extravagant spending for two reasons. The first reason is that it's not necessary. People are just as married if they have a big, expensive wedding as when they go to a justice of the peace. The second reason is that there is no guarantee that the celebrations of the day insure the future. We celebrate the day out of love and joy and gratitude even though we

don't know if the marriage will last until death do us part. And just like an extravagant wedding; this story is extravagantly odd.

Luke is making the connection between the extravagantly odd actions that happen in Simon's house to something that's extravagantly odd about God. Simon had been taught all of his life that God's righteousness couldn't stand sinners, but saves only those like Simon who follow all the laws. But here Jesus teaches a different lesson. Through the parable Jesus says that the depth of our gratitude is proportional to our need for forgiveness.

With this story Luke connects grace and gratitude even as Jesus shows himself to be the one who God has given authority to forgive sins and to share God's generosity to heal life, to restore our relationships and to forgive us sinners. We see that for someone to forgive a debt simply out of grace is extravagant.

We wonder if this extravagant forgiveness is even possible for us to do. Our human nature leans more towards Simon's way of looking at things. Are the core values of our Christian faith—grace, love, mercy, forgiveness really possible in our world or are they things we hope God will bring about one day or maybe they're just wishful thinking.

Can you think of times when the extravagant love shown to Jesus by that unknown woman has been lived out by ordinary men and women? I think back to October 2006 when a shooting took place in a one room Amish schoolhouse. The gunman took hostages and shot ten girls, killing five of them. Remember how we all watched in amazement as the Amish community responded with acts

of forgiveness and reconciliation? Remember how we all watched in disbelief and you can imagine how Simon felt as he watched what was going on in his house, to his guest.

But just because things seem to be impossible and unbelievable doesn't mean they aren't both real and possible. This is the message that Jesus brings to us—with God all things are possible! Jesus showed us what it looks like, what it can be like. The problem is that extravagance never seems practical and it seldom seems like good stewardship.

But thankfully that's not the way that God thinks! We have been claimed and called by a God who is unapologetically extravagant. This is the way God is and we'll see it come to its most meaningful expression on the cross. God calls us to this extravagant living of generosity and forgiveness so that we can be examples for others and in so transform the world.