

Lent 5C-19

Hungering for What Matters—Part 5

“Hungering to Serve”

John 12: 1-8

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John 12: 1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany,
the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.

There they gave a dinner for him.

Martha served,

and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.

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.

But Judas Iscariot,

one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said,

“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii
and the money given to the poor?”

(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.)

Jesus said, “Leave her alone.

She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.

You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

“Hungering to Serve” psychosocial

I almost called this sermon *Hungering for Generativity*, but quickly thought better of it. Generativity doesn't even sound like a real word. It came to light after a developmental psychologist named Erik Erikson used it to describe what he believed to be one of the stages of human development. Essentially, Erikson said that by the time someone reach adulthood—particularly middle-age—healthy, mature individuals begin uncovering meaning and fulfillment within generativity—a care and concern for those beyond themselves. He says that as we grow in generativity, we have a growing need to serve a greater good beyond ourselves; we need to see the manner in which our lives are making a difference in the world around us. . Erikson puts it quite bluntly, “A mature man needs to be needed.”¹

Now, as we've been traversing Lent this year, friends, we've been exploring a version of this very struggle... what do we need? We've been trying to be honest with ourselves about what we've been busy pursuing while our souls go deprived of the things that matter most.

And while I readily admit we're not here to delve into developmental psychology, Erikson speaks to a truth given testimony throughout Scripture... a truth given beautiful testimony in the story playing out in our Gospel lesson this morning.

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There we encounter three siblings—Mary, Martha, and Lazarus—and their friend, Jesus. But “friends” may not be quite the right word to describe the relationship they share. While they were friends, in another sense, they'd also become the kind of family you're not born into, but the kind you choose along the way.

So I'm sure it wasn't a rare occurrence for Jesus to be in the home of Mary and Martha, and their brother Lazarus. As one scholar put it, “Here... is a scene with a family where the one who had no place to lay his head experiences as much home as anywhere in his ministry.”²

There, in their home, they served him. They served him because they loved him. Martha worked hard preparing a meal she knew her Lord would love.

Once nourished with good food and time together, Mary took a jar of perfume—something incredible valuable back then—knelt before Jesus, and turned it over, pouring the whole thing out... all over his ankles and feet.

Then slowly... lovingly... she used her hair to rub and dry them. It was an act of anointing... but a very special kind of anointing. For one only anointed the feet upon a burial. So let's make no mistake, this was an act of love poured out... an act of service to the one who came to Jerusalem to pour himself out.

By this time, the disciples were there. Judas had seen the whole thing, and couldn't believe it. “Jesus,” he said, “That... that jar right there cost 300 denarii, easily. And she just dumped the whole thing out... all over your feet and the floor. Can you imagine the good that money could've done?”

¹ Erik H. Erikson, *Children and Society* (New York: Norton, 1950) 266-267.

² David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors; *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), H. Stephen Shoemaker's Homiletical Perspective, 141.

Jesus turned to Judas pained by what he was hearing, stunned that Judas was counting the cost. Stunned that Judas was literally counting the cost of love and care and service poured out.

Mary was busy offering herself to her Lord... she was literally pouring her possessions and pouring herself out in service to him. But all Judas could do was count the cost.

So Jesus told Judas, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you don't always have me."

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Now, before I go any further, I need to stop here and take just a second to speak to this quote of Jesus that has been so misused and abused. When Jesus says, "You always have the poor with you," he's actually quoting Deuteronomy 15:11, which says "The poor will never cease out of the land; therefore I command you, You shall open your hand... to the needy and to the poor in the land." So please be clear on this. Jesus is NOT saying it's okay to ignore the needs of the poor... but, the exact opposite. He's saying the poor aren't people to simply throw handouts to, but are people we should have with us... who should be included in all that we do. They should be with us so we can give them what they truly need.

But that's the rub, isn't it. There it is again. What do the poor truly need? What do the rich need? What do you and I really need?

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Now, to this point throughout the gospel of John, Jesus had been trying to make clear what his disciples need. But among the many things Jesus demonstrated we need—like silence and surrender and wholeness and communion with God—Jesus sought to make clear that discipleship ultimately means spending yourself—all of yourself—on behalf of God. He made no bones about it. In God's kingdom, the last are first and the first are last. So he told his disciples to give their stuff away... to spend their money, their time, their talents because, Jesus said, it is in giving that you receive.

So when he confronted Judas for condemning Mary's generosity, Jesus was really confronting our all-too-selfish tendency to count the cost. So rather than bashing Judas for doing it, we're better off coming clean ourselves. It's something we all do. When someone or something asks for your money or your time or your possessions... before we give, we count the cost.

For example... Want to know how much I give to this church every year? I can tell you, exactly how much the Carter family gave last year. Why? Because I count it. I don't just hand over a signed check and invite the church to put in any old number. We budget out pledge within our family's monthly budget.

Similarly, if you want to know how much TPC spent on missions beyond our doors in 2018, I can tell you that too... Why? Because we count it. We count all of it.

And so do you. When you're asked to be join a committee... the PTA... give to a local cause... what have you... if you give something meaningful, most of time you're sure to count

the cost, first. We count the cost... of money... of time... or energy... of love... because we want to make sure all our needs are met first. We worry there may not be enough for us if we don't first count how much we have leftover to share.

It's what society has taught us to do. It's utter foolishness to budget in any other way.

And yet, according to Jesus, to count the cost of what we're called to give is to miss out entirely on the very nature grace itself.

It's why he sent his disciples off in ministry without anything at all save the clothes on their back and sandals on their feet. And it's why he was so willing to spend every last ounce he had to give for our sake... so that we might see, once and for all, what it means to spend yourself in service for another... that we might see, once and for all, that even when we give our very last breath God still finds a way to bless us with new and full life.

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You see, friends, stewardship—generativity—the act of giving—the act of serving—the act of spending our time and yes, our treasure, on behalf of others... it's not simply for the benefit of the other. Please, don't misunderstand... it's vitally important that we do serve the other for the sake of the other.

But giving and serving is also vitally important for the sake of the one who gives. We fundamentally need to give. We need to serve in order to taste the life God intends us to live. We need to know what it feels like not simply to be blessed, but to be a blessing. We are all—all of us—hungering to feel the joy of giving a gift without any chance of it every being repaid or returned.

As Erikson put it, we need to be needed.

It's the way God created us...

And it's why Jesus made service and sacrifice the only non-negotiables of discipleship. It's why he made clear, time and time again, that if we want to be his disciples, if we want to count ourselves among his followers... if we want to encounter the kingdom of God in the here and now... then we need to pour ourselves out on behalf of others. Not just for their sake... but for ours, as well. Amen.