

5 LENT MARCH 21, 2010 CYCLE "C"

**TITLE: EXTRAVAGANT GENEROSITY, GRACIOUS
GRATITUDE**

READINGS: Isa. 43: 16-21, Ps. 126, Phil. 3:4b-14, John 12:1-8

Sometimes it just feels good to be extravagant, to throw a special dinner or to take our spouse out for a weekend of unrestrained fun can be up-lifting and healthy for a relationship.. Sometimes it's good to over-do just for the positive results and benefits. It is Isaiah who tells the Israelites how very wonderful it will be when they return from the slavery of Babylon and settle again in their homeland. Remember the Exodus from Egypt, Isaiah says, remember how our God saved us by bringing our nation safely through the Red Sea and how he destroyed the Egyptians like snuffing out a candle? The Lord, he says, "who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick." Isa.43:16-17. If you remember those marvelous things, he says, then just take note of this: When you return from Babylon the Lord will do a new thing. There will be water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert. It will be even greater than before. You will be a people "formed" for myself. In Hebrew the word he uses for formed is *yatsar*, the same word used in Genesis 2:7, when God "formed" Adam from the dust of the ground. So Isaiah assures God's people in this way: Our God is so extravagant that when he brings you out of Babylon it will be like a new creation. It will be like Eden all over again.

We experience even more of God's generosity when we pray Psalm 126 today. When the Israelites are saved from disaster in Babylon it will be like a dream it will be so unbelievable, really too good to be true. Even through those who suffer under slavery sow their seeds in tears and come forth weeping, they will soon come home with shouts of joy and will gather abundance from their own fields here. It will be so extravagantly wonderful! It will be like waking up from a dream and wondering if it is all real.

But it is in today's Gospel selection that we see the best example of extravagant generosity and gracious gratitude. Here we see Jesus on his

way to the cross. It is just a few days before Passover. The chief priests and Scribes are plotting to kill him. Judas is about to betray him. The crucifixion is less than a week away and Jesus is fully aware of it. Jesus and his disciples stop at Bethany. It was just a few days before, that Jesus had raised his dear friend Lazarus from the dead. Now as they are having dinner Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, brings in an alabaster jar of very expensive ointment. She breaks open the brand new jar and pours the costly perfumed oil on Jesus' feet, and gently wipes them with her hair.

How extraordinarily extravagant was this? It was the most gracious expression of gratitude, respect and affection one could give to another. The pure nard John speaks about was a very fragrant oil from a plant imported from the Himalaya Mountains in India. It was extremely expensive and precious, as the Gospel points out costing a year's wages. Then Mary wipes his feet with her hair, a sign of humble submission and total dedication and devotion to her Lord. The word "wiped," of all things, is significant for us because John uses that word only twice more in very important places in his Gospel. He uses it in chapter 11 verse 2 when he describes Lazarus' sister by saying, "Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair." Jn.11:2 Then once again in chapter 13 verse 5, when he is relating the extravagantly humbling gesture of Jesus as he washed his own disciples' feet on Maundy Thursday. "Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him." Jn.13:5. John is teaching us not only that Mary is a wonderful example of what it means to be a totally committed Christian and a humble follower of the Lord, but he also teaches us what it means to Jesus as he stands in the shadow of his cross. "Leave her alone," he says to the protesting thief and betrayer Judas, "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." Jn.12:7-8. The time is very near. He is saying that the cross is close and the time for my burial anointing is here. And John also wants us to realize that soon enough we will witness the reunion of the one who will die for us, for he will soon be alive again!

There was a small tribe of Native Americans who lived in the state of Mississippi. They lived along the banks of a very swift and dangerous river.

The current was so strong that if somebody accidentally fell in, they would likely be swept away to their death downstream. One day this tribe was attacked by another hostile Indian tribe. They found themselves literally with their backs up against the treacherous river. They were greatly outnumbered. Their only chance for escape was to cross the current, which would mean sure death for the children, the elderly, the weak, and the ill and the injured and likely death for many of the strong.

The leaders of the tribe huddled up to devise a plan. The logical thing, the reasonable thing, the expedient thing, the sensible thing was to leave the weak ones behind. They were going to be killed anyway why risk losing the strong in a futile effort to save the others? That was the rational answer but they couldn't do it! Instead, they chose to be extravagant in their generosity and they decided that those who were strong would pick up the weaker ones and put them on their shoulders. So, the little children, the elderly, those who were ill or wounded, were all carried on the backs of the stronger. With great fear, they waded out into the rapid waters of the river and they were met with a great surprise. To their astonishment, they discovered that the weight on their shoulders enabled them to keep their footing through the treacherous current and to make it safely to the other side. Their own extravagant generosity saved them. What they did was not the reasonable thing to do, but it was the right thing to do.

We Christians are not only to carry ourselves but others as well to the cross and resurrection, to life in Jesus Christ. It is in union with Christ and in imitation of those Christians like Mary who showed such extraordinarily extravagant generosity and gracious gratitude that we will. **Amen**

Pastor Barney