

Sacrifice 101: Loving Extravagantly by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



The Alabaster Box

Prayer of Illumination

Prepare our hearts, O God, to accept your Word. Silence in us any voices but your own, so that we may hear your Word and also do it; through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Introduction

What are these people most known for?



Jane Austen?... Her novels *"Pride and Prejudice"* and *"Sense and Sensibility."*



Florence Nightingale?... Military nurse who tended the wounded and sick.



Marie Curie?... Discovery of radium.



Rosa Parks?... Refused to move from her bus seat launched a civil rights movement.



Mother Theresa?... Caring for lepers in India.



Aretha Franklin?... The Queen of Soul.



Simone Biles?... 30 Olympic and World Champion medals in gymnastics.



Coco Chanel?... Chanel No. 5 perfume.

I have another question... *What do you want to be known for?*

When people think of you... *What do you want to be remembered for?*

What do you want to be... *The defining act of your life?*

In our gospel reading today, we don't know the name of this woman of faith, but we know what she did. She is right up there with the women mentioned earlier and she literally poured everything into her devotion to Christ. She has much to teach us about Sacrifice 101.

Let's hear now from...

Scripture: Mark 14:3-9 (NRSV)

While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head.

But some were there who said to one another in anger, "Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor." And they scolded her. But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – Sacrifice 101: Loving Extravagantly



One of my all-time favorite games is the feel-good game called "Totem." I've played it with family, friends, staff, Session, pretty much anybody who will play it with me. Your Totem is made up of an Animal card that's associated with a strength, and then a Quality card. Using these cards that have a whole bunch of different kinds of animals and a whole bunch of different kinds of qualities, the

whole group tries to describe the qualities and strengths of each person in the room. So by the end of the game, each person has their own personal Totem that the group created for them and with them. Some examples are:

Spontaneous Gazelle
Meticulous Buffalo, or
Cultured Lemur

The staff chose for me **Witty Fox**. 😊



I had the privilege of Zooming with the co-creator and co-founder of Totem. His name is Carol Rancourt and he and his wife have five kids and live in Montreal, Canada.

A few years ago, he was eating dinner with some of his friends and one of them needed to leave early from the gathering. After he left, his friends began talking about him—how much they enjoyed his company, his sense of humor, and his loyalty as a friend. After they shared these things, they asked themselves, “Why did we do this when our friend was gone?” Why didn’t we do this while he was here so he could hear all of this?

They wanted to change this. They then decided that they wanted to create a game where you can affirm your friends while they’re still in the room. A game where you can take the time to tell your friends what you like about them before they leave the room, or before they leave this earth.

There’s a similar situation going on in our Gospel reading. Jesus is only hours away from his passion and crucifixion. The religious leaders were scheming to kill Christ. Judas was poised to betray Christ. Everyone was missing the significance of the moment except for two people—Jesus and this nameless woman. Let’s take a closer look at this powerful story that’s found in all four of the Gospels.

Our scene takes place about two miles east of the city of Jerusalem in Bethany, which is on the lower eastern slope of the Mount of Olives. Jesus is at home and he is at a dinner party. Mark doesn’t mention who all the guests are at this gathering, but we know that the host is Simon the leper. We don’t know much about Simon the leper, but he was likely healed of a skin condition by Jesus.

Once again, we see Jesus hanging out with people but the wrong kind of people—the outsiders, those that don’t quite fit in. And the insiders are none too pleased with him for doing this.

The meal they're at isn't the "Last Supper"—that will be later—but in a sense you could call this scene the first supper of Christ's passion.

I am fascinated by Jesus' posture at the party. When you look at the original language, you see that he is reclining at the table. People ate at this time not sitting but lying down. Jesus was likely on a short couch sort of like a pre-modern La-Z-Boy recliner if you will. His left hand would be under his head supporting it and then he would be eating with his right hand, and others would be doing the same. Jesus took the time to slow down and to relax and to enjoy a good meal with friends, even with his impending arrest at hand. I think it's important for us to take our Savior's lead, to seek out those times of respite and reclining, especially when life is becoming a rat race or stressful. We need to follow our Savior's lead for times of respite and reclining, especially when life is becoming a rat race.

And then suddenly, out of nowhere, an uninvited guest barges into the room and crashes the party. There's kind of an awkward silence because of the intruder's presence. It's not easy going to a party or gathering where you don't know anybody. We wonder how we will be received. Will we be noticed, will we be welcomed or invited into that circle of trust, or will we be just ignored? That's why it's so important for us, as followers of Christ, to be welcoming and friendly to everyone. Not just to our friends, but to guests, and to new people, and to outsiders and insiders alike.

But this party crasher didn't care. There was something much more important that she wanted to do than to worry about first impressions. She had with her a very expensive alabaster jar of perfume. Only the purest and best perfume was contained within alabaster jars. This essential and aromatic oil came from a rare plant in India so it was worth about a year's worth of wages for a day laborer. This alabaster jar and the ointment or nard within it were likely a family heirloom passed down from the mother to this woman.

Now it was a common practice at that time for a host to honor a dinner guest with a quick splash of this very costly perfume. Only a dab would do, just a little bit, a hint. But this woman did something shocking, something bizarre. She didn't just spray, dab, and sachet, she dashed and broke that expensive jar and then dumped the entire contents upon Jesus' head. You could almost hear the collective gasp in the room, the whispers, and then the ensuing grumbling. They tsked, they clucked, they shook their heads at her. The guests then became indignant and incredulous. "Why this waste?" This perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor!

You see, this was the time of Passover coming up very shortly. There was a custom during this holy festival of Passover of giving alms and extra tithes to the poor. We have a similar thing during Lent. We have our annual Lenten food drive. They had their annual Passover food drive for the poor. And so it was easy for the dinner guests to come to this conclusion. They understood the big picture of what was going on at Passover, but it was at the cost of the moment that they were in. So it was the insiders that were being stingy and this outsider was being generous. Not wasteful, but unsparing in her devotion to Christ. It was an act of total abandonment to God.

"Leave her alone," said Jesus. "Why are you making trouble for her?" You see, Jesus didn't like people being picked on or pushed around. So Jesus was tapping in this moment to his inner momma bear here.

As Christians, in the footsteps of Christ, we need to also be both tough and tender. We use the power entrusted to us thoughtfully—both to bless and to protect others. So Jesus was in a sense saying “friends, you’re seeing this all wrong. She has done a beautiful thing here, a good work, a praiseworthy deed.” You see, love not only does good things, but love does lovely things. Love does lavish things. True love is extravagant, not closed-fisted or penny-pinching. This woman was giving us a foreshadowing of Christ’s abounding love for us—dying for all the sins of the world—past, present, and future. And so just as that beautiful alabaster jar was broken, so too would Jesus’ body be broken on the cross for us, for the world, for the whole world as the scriptures say. Even though we were enemies of God, Christ still died for us. Jesus continues putting the dinner guests in their place by paraphrasing Chapter 15 of the book of Deuteronomy: “There will never cease to be some in need on the earth.”

Or in Jesus’ words in our passage:

“You always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me.” ([Mark 14:7](#))

The book of Ecclesiastes says, “for everything there is a season.” There’s a time for slow thinking and there’s a time for fast thinking. There’s a time in life for careful deliberation and then a time for swift action. This woman needed not to *carpe diem*, to seize the day, but she needed to *carpe noctis*, which means to seize the night at this dinner party. The woman seized the night, *carpe noctis*, before it slipped away from her. In other words, she got it. She was paying attention. She was attending to the NOW. She was living in the moment and she would not let it pass her by. There are norms and there are exceptions in life. This night was not a normal night, it was an exceptional night.

Missed opportunities are such a tragedy, aren’t they? When we thought of doing something but just didn’t quite get around to it or we were too late and the moment was gone. This woman teaches us to pay attention and always be ready to savor, to celebrate, and to seize serendipitous moments in our lives. To know the difference between *chronos* time (clock time) and *kairos* time (seasonal time). The difference between sequential time and the opportune time for action. In a sense, when it’s time to pump the brakes and when it’s time to put the pedal to the metal, quantitative time vs. qualitative time. This woman knew it was *kairos* time, that it was time to act and to act boldly. Let us follow her example and live and love with no regrets whatsoever, YOLO (*you only live once*). Let’s step out in faith and not second guess ourselves at those moments. Let’s be both thoughtful but also spontaneous in our giving and in our service. We can walk and we can chew gum at the same time. This woman acted. She did what she could with what she had. She made her sacrifice. She took the initiative. She didn’t give a rip about what other people thought. This was about Jesus.

So, what’s your personal sacrifice for Jesus? Not someone else’s sacrifice. I’m not talking about that. Don’t worry about that. Don’t judge someone else’s gift—that’s between them and God alone. Not you. But what about your sacrifice? What’s your best thing to give to God? What is God leading you to give? And how much of it? We each have a unique giving language and signature style that we need to become fluent in in our lives. So don’t hold back. Let it rip. Give with all of your heart, all of your mind, your soul, your strength. Love your neighbor as yourself. Don’t love with someone else’s heart, or someone else’s mind, or someone else’s soul or strength. Not someone else’s neighbor, but yours. Be remembered for that. Maybe others will think your unique gift is weird—who cares. Let your freak flag and faith flag fly. Take some ownership, some initiative. Don’t settle for hand-me-

downs. Be original and genuine. Be true to yourself. Don't wear Saul's ill-fitting armor. Be who you are, give who you are to God. Do it for Jesus and Jesus alone. Live for an audience of one.

It's what Dieterich Bonhoeffer called the "Cost of Discipleship." How invested are you in disciple of Jesus Christ? What do you need to offer up to Jesus? Make it personalized, straight from your heart. Not to impress, not for approval, not for show, but do for God what you need to do. What can you and you alone do for Jesus that no one else can? Jesus tells the woman, and tells us too, what we give from the heart is a beautiful thing.

St. Augustine puts it this way: "LOVE and then do what you will." In other words, if you're not harming other people and you're loving, do it. There is no law against that. Some people think that Jesus is saying in this passage that we don't need to care for the poor. That is a misreading of our text. Jesus and everyone in the room knew that you always care for the poor. Jesus knew the next sentence from Deuteronomy 15 that he quoted earlier, and it says this:

"I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'"

So we must care for those that God cares for and God cares for the poor always. And God also cares for his *Anointed, the Messiah, the Christ*, God's beloved Son.

So we too must always care for the poor, but we can't let that get in the way of those special fleeting, transient moments to celebrate, to soak in, and even to indulge in a very special moment. Jesus was about to die and now was the time to extravagantly love him. He was like a beautiful flower that was cut from a plant that would soon wither and die. Or as the poet and priest Robert Herrick put it:

*"Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying;
And this same flower that smiles today
Tomorrow will be dying."*

Giving in our lives should be planned, but giving in our lives also needs be spontaneous—it's both/and. There are times to be extravagant in our giving. Maybe buying that expensive flower arrangement for a loved one to celebrate a new life born or a life that has been concluded. There are times to offer a generous gift when we feel prompted by the Holy Spirit to bless another person who is in a time of need. We should be ready in and out of season to give and to give generously. Thinking back to the widow who gave her last two coins or two mites, this woman here like her gave her most prized possession as a gift, as a sacrifice. Both were pleasing in God's sight. She was anointing the Anointed One, which is in Hebrew *the Messiah* and in Greek is *Christos* or Christ.

In Israel, kings were consecrated by literally pouring oil on their heads. "*Thou anointest my head with oil,*" says King David in Psalm 23. But this woman was anointing not just a king, but she was anointing a soon-to-be-corpse for burial. There was a custom in the Middle East at the time, that after the corpse had been anointed for burial, that the jar that contained the ointment would be broken and the fragments would be left in the tomb with the dead body. That's why the woman broke her alabaster jar in the story. The shards would be with her Savior in his sepulchre. You see, Jesus needed to be anointed BEFORE his burial because he wouldn't be able to be anointed AFTER his death because he rose again! There was "no body" to anoint! He is risen!

On the surface, from a purely worldly perspective, this woman's sacrifice was a royal waste of resources, a squandering of them. It was foolish. But with the eyes of faith, it was a beautiful and good act of service and worship to God. And God's forgiveness of us, in like manner, is truly extravagant, even indulgent. "Truly I tell you," or in the original language "Amen I tell you," says Jesus, "wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

We partake of holy communion in remembrance of Jesus. It's carved right into our communion table, isn't it? "Do this IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME." Never forget Jesus. But also, Jesus tells us, never forget this nameless woman with the alabaster jar who anointed Jesus with her most prized and expensive possession. She did her act of sacrifice in remembrance of Jesus. And Jesus returned the favor. He remembered her. This tribute is enshrined in all four of the Gospels. So like the old widow, this woman is a living legend of giving and sacrifice. Jesus remembers her, we remember her today, and Jesus remembers us. Jesus remembers those who have gone on to glory. He doesn't forget. They are precious in his sight.

So, back to the question: **What do you want to be remembered for?** Lay that at Jesus's feet. Give it to him. Pour it on his head.

Jesus loves us so much, he cares so much about our sacrifice, that he connects our acts of love with his acts of love. He is not afraid to be associated with us. Jesus is not embarrassed of us. He brags about us. He stands up for us, and sometimes rebuffs us, but Jesus has not forgotten what you've offered to him—he remembers. Every gift given in love, every gift offered generously, spontaneously, joyfully, and sacrificially, is received, respected, and remembered by Jesus. Whether it be two pennies or a high priced perfume. Did you also notice the hope that Jesus had in his words? Even though he's about to face his crucifixion, Jesus is already believing in the resurrection, that the good news will be proclaimed, around the whole world! Even though Jesus in that moment was in the crucible, he had the faith and he had the hope to see beyond his present trials that were very real. He kept the vision alive even though he couldn't see it. We don't know this woman's name, we don't know her background, nor her relationship with Jesus, but we know what she has done.

"Whatever your task, put yourselves into it," says Paul, "as done for the Lord." ([Col. 3:23](#))

Let us offer OUR sacrifice to Jesus and for Jesus. And like that nameless woman, let us also be living sacrifices.

Amen.

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