



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## Baptized into the Extravagance of God

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

March 21, 2010

Fifth Sunday in Lent (Year C)

**John 12:1-8**

### 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."*

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A great theologian once said, "It's almost impossible to be sane and Christian at the same time." He then went on to a deeper confession, one that I'm afraid I share: "On the whole," he writes, "I've been more sane than Christian."

I suspect you understand what he means. If you're anything like most folks in the church today—especially in the Presbyterian Church in North America—then you surely know something about our desire to be reasonable. We live our lives between the Christian mandate to love and our desire to be reasonable, to live lives of moderation and care. And then one day we wake up to the fact that perhaps we've been more sane—more reasonable—than Christian.

One thing's for sure: Mary wasn't behaving reasonably that night when Jesus was at their house for supper. This is a story which challenges our sensibilities, and for that reason it's a story that we need to hear deeply. But we can't hear it completely unless we go back a bit in John's Gospel because the context is so important.

Most of the time, the empty tomb is a hopeful sign for us in the church. It stands as a symbol of the resurrection. Early on Easter morning, Mary goes to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body for burial, but returns shouting out the good news: "The tomb is

empty. He isn't there. The tomb is empty." And from that point on the church's witness is to Christ's power over death.

But we're not there yet. Just before our reading today, however, John has told us the story of how Jesus raised Lazarus, and the empty tomb out in the backyard is begging to be filled. The empty tomb lurking just beyond the banquet table that night is not a sign of hope, but of death. This story of Lazarus and his tomb, of Jesus and his friend, stands right at the heart of John's Gospel. It is the fulcrum on which the story turns; the moment of decision is here. If you want to understand Mary's bizarre actions, you can't start at the table. You have to start with one of Jesus' closest friends, Lazarus, lying dead in a sealed tomb.

Some of you will remember that story. Jesus is far away from Bethany when the news reaches him, "Lazarus is dead." And the disciples wondered why he didn't immediately rush back to Bethany and see Mary and Martha, the dead man's sisters. But he didn't go. Jesus waited three more days. Finally, he goes to Bethany, and when Martha hears that Jesus is arriving in town, she runs out to greet him, and she tells him again that Lazarus is dead. Then John lets us in on their conversation, when she says—part faith; part accusation—something that continues to echo: "If you had been here, Lazarus would not have died."

And Jesus responds, "Your brother will live again." This is an important moment in John's Gospel. Here, in the face of death, is a statement of resurrection hope. This Jesus, the one standing in a city cloaked in grief over the death of Lazarus, dares to speak the truth: "Martha, I am the resurrection and the life. Do you believe?"

"Yes, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God."

So, Martha runs home and gets her sister Mary, and tells her that Jesus is here. And again, Jesus hears the same statement of faith and accusation: "If you had been here, my brother would not have died."

And all began to weep. And they took Jesus to the place where Lazarus was buried, and in one of the most poignant scenes in scripture, Jesus—the resurrection and the life—weeps in the face of death.

Maybe it was then that Jesus knew what he must do. He told some standing there to roll away the stone from the cave's entrance, and then he called Lazarus: "Come out." And Lazarus was given new life.

But it came at a cost: The life of Lazarus had cost Jesus his own. If you look to the back of the crowd watching the scene that day, you'll see some of the religious leaders taking notes. And the scene ends with these words: "So from that day on they planned to put Jesus to death."

And now, as Jesus ate dinner with his friends, it seemed that everyone sitting at the table that day could smell the unmistakable presence of death. But it wasn't Lazarus they smelled; it was the empty tomb waiting for the body of Jesus. No one knew.

No one but Mary, that is. Somehow she sensed it. Oh, she may not have thought it

all out; she may not have had the theological vision that comes from our point of view, but somehow she knew. And when she disappeared from the table, she came back carrying a jar of perfume. She came up to Jesus, and just for a moment, the crowd wondered. “She’s going to anoint his head,” they thought. That would be a normal thing to do. But just then, she broke the jar, knelt, and poured it out on his feet, just as she had done for her dead brother a few days before. This action, whether intended or not, has marked Jesus as one about to die.

Sitting at the table that day, with the other disciples, is Judas. And he’s right, you know. It seems like such a terrible waste, such an extravagant action. Just imagine pouring out a bottle of perfume that represented a whole year’s worth of wages, just pouring it out on the feet of Jesus. It seems like such a waste, and you’ve got to wonder what sort of a person would do something like that. It just wasn’t a reasonable thing to do.

Who would do that? A prophet. Like Ezekiel who ate the scroll to show that God’s word was within him; like Jeremiah who smashed the earthen vessel as a sign of God’s judgment; like Isaiah who wandered the streets naked as a sign of God’s coming judgment on the people, Mary—the prophet—sees the truth of God and pours it out in such a bizarre way that you can’t miss it: Jesus is on his way to death.

Two times in this larger story there are moments when people hold nothing back in their participation in what God is up to through the gospel. There is Jesus who calls forth Lazarus at the risk of his own life. And there is Mary, whose extravagant anointing of Jesus’ feet reveals a life poured out as well.

And so I wonder: what enables Jesus and Mary to give themselves so completely to the gospel, to hold nothing back? And why do I so often feel myself seeking to preserve my life, my sanity, my reputation, my faith—holding it all so tightly in my hands and trying to hold on to as much of it as I can? Why, in other words, does “reasonableness” so often trump “Christian” for me?

Of all the temptations that come to us, this is perhaps the biggest one facing churches like Massanutten today—the temptation to measure faith so carefully, to count the costs, to figure the bottom line, to hem in emotion, to revere reason over impassioned belief, to maintain decency and order rather than risk the wild abandon of God’s disruptive presence. The danger, of course, is that by holding faith back, by checking the reins, we find ourselves holding onto a life which is as good as dead. Do you remember how many times Jesus told us that if you love your life you will lose it? But if you give it away for the sake of the gospel, you will find it.

Yes, you and I and those like us must resist the temptation to be ordinary, average, dare we say it, mediocre. No, the gospel demands more of us. The church today may not demand much; we may not even expect much of ourselves, but the gospel does and always will. You see, Jesus calls us to far nobler lives than most of us dare to live. Jesus calls us to rise above the mediocre who hold onto the last ounce of fragrance not realizing that it’s worthless in their hands. In order to be useful, it must be poured out.

That's what Ernest Becker calls for in his book called *The Denial of Death*. He argues for the church to call people today to heroic faith. Heroic—not exactly a word that we're altogether comfortable with. It seems too idealized, too romantic, too big to describe us. And so we call each other to do what it takes to get by, to do what we did last year, to remove ourselves from the chaos of life.

No, no, no! To all of these things the church must say no. And we must be in the business of calling each other to radical lives of self-giving, of self-emptying love. Moments when, by the sheer grace of God, we find ourselves holding nothing back, pouring out our lives for the sake of the gospel—for the sake of love—moments when we discover ourselves doing things we never dreamed we could do.

When we take time to consider all that God has done, we are invited to hold nothing back. Not our money. Not our time. Not our talents. Our whole lives—every bit of it—poured out for the sake of what God is doing in the midst of this world that God loves. You see, when it comes to our lives of discipleship, the waste is not in pouring out, but in holding back.

In just a moment, we will baptize Molly into the divine extravagance of God—the God who acts so extravagantly—so outrageously—so lavishly—toward us, and we will spend a lifetime reminding her, and reminding each other, that we are called to mirror God's extravagance in our own lives—lives given away in response to what we have been freely given. My prayer for Molly is that she will turn out to be not just reasonable, but extravagant in her actions because of what she comes to know of the divine extravagance of God.