

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
February 28, 2010

Anointed by a Woman in Bethany

Matthew 26:6-13

Key verse: “Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her” (Matthew 26:13).

Valentine’s Day came just a couple of weeks ago. I wonder how many guys are like me, and feel uneasy about what to do for their sweethearts on Valentine’s Day. In my case, I’m in my fourth decade of marriage. I love my wife, but what romantic expression can I do or say after so many years that I haven’t already done or said?

Also, Valentine’s Day has become so much more expensive, hasn’t it? I read recently that the average consumer now spends over \$100 for Valentine’s Day. Remember when a card and some candy was the accepted expression of love?

Well, Valentine’s Day came and went, and I am still happily married. So, I guess things went OK. But it started me thinking: Are there times when we should be *lavish* and *extravagant* in our expressions of love? Rather than doing just enough to be acceptable—and stay out of the proverbial “dog house”—are there times when we ought to go “over the top” in showing our loved ones how much they mean to us?

Matthew 26:6-13 tells the story of one woman’s lavish, extravagant, “over the top” expression of love for Jesus. Her story is familiar to most of us, but the details may not be. Let’s look at a few important details of this story....

Bethany, where this story took place, was a town located on the Mount of Olives, about two miles from Jerusalem. The road from Jericho to Jerusalem went through Bethany. On this occasion, Jesus and his disciples came to Bethany on their way to Jerusalem and the cross of Calvary.

All of this reminds us that the events of Mt. 26:6-13 are *bracketed* by the passion and death of Christ. In the preceding verses, 26:1-5, Jesus foretells his crucifixion and the religious leaders plot to arrest and kill Him. The material following 26:6-13 marches inexorably to the Last Supper, Jesus’ arrest and trial, and the events of the crucifixion.

So, with these details in mind, we know that Mt. 26:6-13 is best understood when viewed *in the shadow of the cross*.

Who was *Simon the leper*? We can’t be sure, but many believe that he probably was a man whom Jesus had healed of the dread disease of leprosy. It was in Simon’s home at Bethany that the events of 26:6-13 took place.

Who was the woman who anointed Jesus with costly ointment? Matthew's gospel does not identify her by name, but her story is also told in John 12. There she is identified as Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus.

So, on the way to Jerusalem and the cross, Jesus gathers at the home of a former leper who Jesus made whole. Also, drawing on John's gospel, it seems likely that this event occurs after the resurrection of Lazarus by Jesus (John 11). In fact, John's gospel places the story of Mary anointing Jesus as follows: "Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead" (John 12:1).

In the home of a leper healed by Jesus, in the company of her brother whom Jesus raised from death—is it any wonder that Mary was stirred to offer this lavish, extravagant, "over the top" expression of love for her Lord?

So, Mary came to Jesus "with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table" (v. 7). The costly perfumed ointment was probably *nard*, from India, and worth a year's pay! Because of its value, the ointment would normally be used in very small quantities and only on very special occasions. But Mary "pours" it freely, generously, as her expression of extravagant love for Jesus. Notice the disciples' response and notice Jesus' response....

The disciples are "angry" and say: "Why this waste? For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor" (vv. 8-9).

But Jesus' response is very different. He says: "Why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me" (vv. 10-11).

The next verse reminds us that following Jesus' crucifixion, his body would be wrapped with spices (John 19:40). For Jesus sees Mary's act of devotion as prophetic: "By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial" (v. 12).

The final verse emphasizes the significance of Mary's lavish, extravagant expression of her love for Jesus. For Jesus says of what Mary has done: "Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her" (Mt. 26:13).

Valentine's Day has just passed. But we are now in the heart of the Lenten season. As we prepare our hearts to walk again with Jesus to the cross and celebrate His resurrection, my question is: *When is the last time I offered Jesus my lavish, extravagant, "over the top" expression of love? Wouldn't this holy season of Lent and Easter be a wonderful time to do just that?*

For you and me, what would such an expression be? It might be that, instead of just putting in our "required" hour of worship on Sunday, we set aside a larger block of time just to worship and praise our Lord. Our extravagant expression of love for Jesus might be through *worship*.

Or we might show our love lavishly by a generous gift of *time or money*. Or our extravagant expression of love might be through *service*, remembering that Jesus told us, “whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40).

Whatever form your extravagant expression of love for Jesus takes, make sure you offer it—like Mary—from a heart overflowing with love for all that Jesus has done for you!

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