

A HOLY DIFFERENCE
PHILIPPIANS 3:4B-14 AND JOHN 12: 1-8
NOVEMBER 1, 2020
EASTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

I start with a true story of a missionary family forced to leave China as the communist party took control. Soldiers came to their door announcing a two-hour window of time and a limit of two-hundred pounds for their relocation. The weighing began. The vase, a family heirloom. The typewriter, it was new. Books...oh how precious. Stuff and things on and off the scales. The soldiers returned and the family was proud to tell them that they hit the mark...two-hundred pounds, to which the soldiers replied, "Did you weigh the children?" The vase, typewriter, books, in an instant, become rubbish. None of it compared to the value of their children.

Sometimes 2020s crash into our lives in such shocking ways that we are forced to see life differently. What was once of value we are all too happy to leave behind, like Mary who has witnessed the power of life over death and nothing else compares.

This is a personal story of stewardship. More than financial resources, though, it is a story about how we give the most precious commodity we have, ourselves. From the pages of history, she is reaching out asking every generation, asking you, asking me: If we believe in the power of our Lord who can give new life in this world and promises eternal life where there are no more tears, no more pain, no more sorrow--if you believe that--how can you not live out extravagant, nothing-held-back worship and thanksgiving to God?

Mary has more than enough reason to be extravagant with her thanksgiving. Raised by the power of Jesus, brother Lazarus has walked out of the tomb, she and Martha are throwing a dinner party! Considering that just a few days before the sisters were not happy with Jesus taking his sweet time to come to their brother's aid, this is a turn-around!

But Jesus knew about timing and he knew what he was doing. He was making a holy difference with the raising of Lazarus, for a holy purpose. Jesus used his friend as a living example of giving glory to God who brings life out of death.

This is timely for us because in so many we have all been experiencing death in some form this year. Certainly, loss of life, the death of what was or what had been hoped. We have all been grieving for many different reasons. And grieving amid the joy is where we meet Mary. Even as life is celebrated, death is in the air. She recognized something in Jesus, more than a good healer, teacher, preacher that made a holy difference in her values and life. Her extravagant gift at Jesus' feet was the deepest way to show her thanksgiving. Jesus is no longer just a friend, he is her Lord, and her belief in him as Savior has changed her.

Barbara Brown Taylor sees Mary's actions as a foreshadowing of God's action on the cross and in the tomb...a death to life difference. She writes, "Like the bottle of perfume, Jesus' precious life was also not meant to be saved. It was going to be opened, offered, and used, at great price. It was going to be raised up and poured out for all humankind, emptied to the last drop until the fragrance of his sacrifice takes the world's breath away."

Mary embraces the holy difference this moment makes as she kneels for a second time at Jesus' feet. She, like the missionary family, understood they were faced to face with a new way of living and being. Paul captures their emotions like this: all the former things I had gained were like rubbish after I met Christ. The family, Mary, Paul, they are now witness to the truth that things that used to have a hold on them are nothing compared

to a relationship with Jesus. They are also aware that an opportunity to show love extravagantly may be gone tomorrow. So, why wait?

Mary poured it all out that day. Her gift, her generous offering, reminded Jesus who he was and how much he was loved. Jesus understood that Mary's act of unexpected and extravagant generosity was a gift of love. Understanding that, Jesus tells Judas, "Leave her alone."

With her outpouring came with risks. Into a room full of men, walked Mary. She approached Jesus. She touched him. All of things women just did not do! Then scripture gives us a front row seat to the character of Judas. For all to hear he questions, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"

Some think Judas would have bagged the money before any poor received it. Some say he could have just been concerned as to why all that money, a year's worth of wages, had been wasted on perfume, and then turned into a wasteful offering. Either way, he did not understand nor was he moved by what Mary and Jesus knew to be a show of love. He could not wrap his head around the fact that Mary held nothing back financially, not even this rare, expensive, heavenly-smelling nard taken, drop by drop, from a root found only in Eastern India and then hauled across the Arabian desert to Middle Eastern countries.

Mary kneels at Jesus' feet, lets her hair down, empties out the most valuable she had ever owned or probably ever own again, anoints Jesus feet, drying them with her hair. That is exactly what generosity, born of gratitude, does. It makes a holy difference. It makes a holy difference in the life of the one on the receiving end of that generosity, for sure. But it also makes a difference in the life of the one who is being generous.

While others are inhaling the smell of this extravagant perfume, Mary is smelling...death. She knows the Pharisees are plotting to kill her friend, and most likely her brother, too, and she senses the urgency to anoint Jesus for death and burial. It is not a time to withhold gifts or resources for self. Nothing for Mary will ever be more costly than God giving his son over to death, so we would have life. And in an instant all other things became trash. The way she was devalued as a woman. The expense of the perfume. Rubbish! None of it meant anything compared to the price Jesus paid for our salvation.

At that moment, you know she must have felt surrounded by joy. That act of giving made a holy difference in Jesus' life, but also in her own life. It expanded her own spirit, empowering her with even deeper courage as she follows Jesus all the way to the cross just a few days later. It was a day that further changed her life and continues to make differences in ours.

On a cold December day, a stranger made a holy difference in my life, too. It is a true story you have heard before, but bears repeating. Leading up to our first Christmas Village in 2013. I was using my little, green Miata much like Santa's sleigh. From home I was cramming just about every Christmas decoration I had in the car to transform the building into a village.

As I was loading and unloading an old beaten-up truck pulled into the parking lot. I have to admit, it was a UGH moment. It was cold. I was tired. It was getting dark. The man approached slowly and introduced himself as Michael. He was hungry. Before I could tell him I would get food, he asked, "What are you doing?"

Well, you know me and Christmas Village. A heart-warming conversation came to life...until that blast of cold wind brought us back to reality and I hurried off to get the food. Upon returning, Michael told me he wanted to give something to the Christmas Village and that he had several things in the back of his truck, which had a tarp

over it. My guard went up a bit and Michael sensed that. Instead of being insulted, he simply said, let me see what I have. I stayed by my car. He fished around in the back of his truck, and sure enough, he came back with one of the ugliest Santa Claus's I have seen. Cheap. Paint peeling off the glass body. Already in my head I was trying to think how I would politely decline the offer.

That was until Michael said this, as best as I can paraphrase: I found this in a dumpster. Guess someone thought it was just trash. But I thought to myself, "You know, I need a little Christmas in my life." He went on to say it had been a tough year, but probably not as bad as some of those kids and families. I cannot give you money or clothes or toys, but maybe I can give a little bit of Christmas to brighten their day. Could you use it for a decoration? It is just a Santa, but every time you bring people into the church, you get the chance to tell them about the real gift of Christmas...Jesus. I think Jesus would like this Santa.

Michael was moved to make an offering that he hoped would not only bring some "merry and bright" but would also shine like the light of Jesus. He gave his Christmas joy, the thing someone else thought of as rubbish, and offered it as thanksgiving to God for the gift of the Christ child. You talk about being humbled.

I think his decision to make that generous offering, one born of gratitude, made a holy difference in his life; I know it did in mine. I will not forget his witness, and Michael is still part of my prayer life.

As we continue prayerfully considering what we will give as thanksgiving to God for the Lord's work in this church and the building up of God's kingdom everywhere, I pray we fully understand and embrace what kind of holy differences our gifts...big or small...and never rubbish in the eyes of God, will make in the lives of others, and ours. It is a lesson we can take to heart from Mary, from Michael, and from the missionaries. May we embrace this holy and sacred truth: In the grace of giving, and receiving, the joy of the Spirit makes a holy difference! Amen