

A rich man was determined to give his mother a birthday present that would outshine all others. He read of a bird that had a vocabulary of 4000 words, could speak in numerous languages and sing 3 operatic arias. He immediately bought the bird for \$50,000 and had it delivered to his mother. The next day he phoned to see if she had received the bird. "What did you think of the bird?" he asked. She replied, "It was delicious."

We live in a world where for many, the last remaining cardinal sin is the act of waste. Our toilets are lo-flush and our furnaces, high efficiency. Our words are acute and specific; our buildings are tall and modern. In the world around us, as little as possible is given over to waste.

And so it's a strange feeling to look at this morning's scripture reading and ask: who in this story do I most identify with, and to hear the answer come back: Judas. Relating to Judas in a story – especially this close to Easter – is like watching the US elections, and saying "that Trump guy, he sure makes a lot of sense." But here we are: like good responsible Presbyterians we find ourselves agreeing with Judas a little more than we might like.

After all, 300 denarii – more than \$31,000 dollars by today's standards, or (if you prefer) a brand new Hyundai Genesis 2.0T R-Spec – seems like a lot of money to spend – even on Jesus. Be honest. Think about your tax receipts and ask yourself: was I that generous?

In a lot of ways, this seems like a preacher's dream passage. With the lingering memory of the Annual meeting and close enough to Easter that our numbers are bumped up, this is the perfect passage for a message on Stewardship, or generosity. Give generously to Jesus, I would say.

Or at least it would be if it were about money.

Because that's not what this passage is about at all. In fact, that's precisely the point Jesus raises with Judas. Stop thinking with your wallets, because money can't solve the problems that this world faces. This action isn't about the cost. Of course it's wasteful, but that's what makes it beautiful.

We participate in waste every single Sunday. If we were really interested in wasting nothing, we'd sell the building and buy a concrete cube that could be rented out Monday to Saturday. We wouldn't have vaulted ceilings that are designed to draw our eyes upward. We wouldn't have stained glass, pipe organs, or pews. We would have only what is most efficient. And yet that's not where we find ourselves this morning, because as everything around us testifies this morning: beauty always requires waste.

This isn't a passage about generosity. This is a passage about choice.

The choice of beauty over utility; the choice of waste over want; the choice of worship over worth.

This is a story defined by choices.

Tradition, dating all the way back to the fourth century, holds that the woman at the centre of this story, unnamed in the other four gospels, was a prostitute. So put yourself in her shoes for a moment. She hears that Jesus is coming to dinner, and so (instead of helping Martha in the kitchen) she goes out on an errand.

Down the street she walks, past the rows of houses to the centre of town where the perfumers shop is. As she walks in, he looks up from his work and sees her standing in the doorway – recognizing her immediately. Here in his doorway stands the prostitute of Bethany. What could she possibly want.

He knows that she's not his usual clientele. After all, a pound of nard, this pungent oil made from crushed pistachios costs an arm and a leg. He decides that she can't afford what he's selling and turns back to his work. Without a word, a bag of coins is produced. 300 Denarii.

And he scoffs. You mean to take this gift and use it to lure more men into your bed? You come here with money earned by selling yourself, by selling your dignity, and you come here to use my honest labour? You would insult me?

It's a message that she's heard whispered to her for as long as she can remember. You're not worthy of respect, of dignity and of value. But she pushes forward the bag of money because she's already made up her mind. He's right she decided before she stepped foot into this shop. I'm not worthy of it. But I know someone who is.

That's where worship begins. It starts when we recognize that we are a people without value, that God valued enough to give up the life of His son.

But how easy the choice would have been to turn back. To run from her reality, and ours - chasing the fever dream that if I can just make one more bad choice, something good will finally come of it. Worship starts at the point where we choose to admit what God has known about every one of us all along: we are all broken; we all fall short; we are all unworthy. Because it's only when we choose to stop hiding behind our own sufficiency that Grace can break in and demonstrate for us the amazing love of God: that even in our brokenness, even in our sin, even in our unworthiness, God gave himself up for us. It starts when we admit the perfumer was right and we aren't worthy, but we know someone who is.

But that wasn't the only choice she made that day. Because as she walked back toward the outskirts of town where they lived a familiar voice began to speak to her. It was the same voice

that whispered to Jesus in the desert: bow down and worship me, and all the kingdom's of the earth will be yours. Now it whispers to Mary, pouring that perfume over Jesus' feet would be a beautiful gesture, but Jesus' ministry needs donors. He needs people to fund his mission. Imagine how much more money you could make if you used this perfume on yourself instead? How much more you could charge each man you bring to bed? You could fund Jesus ministry for years if you think about this perfume as an investment, rather than an offering.

How tempting an offer that must have been, and the determination that was required to take each step, placing each foot in front of the other – to remember that the call of Jesus on our lives wasn't to become donors, but to become disciples. Donors are distanced from mission, where disciples are engaged. Donors worry about membership lists, disciples worry about participation numbers. **Jesus' church has never needed more donors, but it has never needed disciples more.**

Every step that she took was the choice to be a disciple rather than a donor. And it's a good thing she did, since Jesus' triumphal entry was a week away and the cross was a week beyond that. We sometimes treat the call to discipleship like it's something that we can take part in later, but the reality is that there's not always a later. Discipleship demands immediacy. If you are a Christian that means following Christ right now. Too often Christians are caught waiting. The civil war in Syria and the refugee crisis simmered for two years until the world decided it was time to do something and churches followed suit. Our own PWS&D office hired staff to help process refugee sponsorship paperwork almost two years ago, but the church sat on its hands – and now the government is doing what the church failed to. Discipleship demands immediacy. Right now, if you are a follower of Christ, get involved. I don't care how young you are or how old you are. There is life in Christ that needs living and that means we need you, like Mary, to choose now over later.

Mary's choices are all around us.

But only one of those choices found its way into all four gospels. The final choice was the choice of extravagance. If you've ever walked into the Bay, you know that a little bit of perfume goes a long way. Some scholars argue that in this action, Mary is recreating an ancient Greco-Roman ceremony, familiar to the first century audience – where Caesar, as he left the gates of the city on his way to battle would be anointed with oil by a young woman in an elaborate production. But in either instance, a little bit of perfume was all that was needed. Other gospel writers make the point that Mary breaks the alabaster jar the perfume was in because there is no going backward. In any case Mary chooses extravagance, because that was the only way to say what she really wanted to say: I would give you more if I had more to give.

That's the beating heart of this passage. As people of the cross, loving God is something we do extravagantly – 24/7/365. And because loving God that way is beautiful it will always produce waste – and that waste is the cost of discipleship. Cheap Grace, what Bonhoeffer called the Great enemy of the church, is all too readily available. 80 years ago, he wrote this:

*Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without penance. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. Grace needs to be costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: 'Ye were bought at a price', and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God."*

This passage reminds us that there is no line in the sand that we can get safely across before we sit back and rest. This passage reminds us that the Cross to which we come every single week beckons us to come and die, and in doing so, experience the love of God's resurrection again and again and again. This passage calls us to look at the cross and say, what a waste.

Light is more important than the lantern,  
The poem more important than the notebook,  
And the kiss more important than the lips.

My letters to you  
Are greater and more important than both of us.  
They are the only documents  
Where people will discover  
Your beauty  
And my madness.

And for the sake of Christ, may our waste be more important than our work.