

"COURAGEOUS GENEROSITY" (John 12: 1-8, preached at Footscray Baptist Church on April 3rd, 2022)

Last week we shared some homemade pizzas with some of the people using the Orange Sky service. As we did, they all showed their appreciation and started planning who would contribute what to a meal the following week. Sharing food or a simple meal with people can be memorable for all kinds of reasons – along with food everything else ends up on the table – stories, joys and sorrows. I felt like a little community was beginning to form.

Our gospel story today has as its setting a meal, a meal between friends at one of their houses. The setting is the home of Martha, Lazarus and Mary in Bethany. Jesus has been here before; last time he was here he raised Lazarus after having been in the tomb for several days. That act had led to the increasing popularity of Jesus and to the hatching of a death plot by the religious authorities. Last time Jesus was with this family, Martha was worried about the stench from Lazarus' tomb, this time the house is filled perfume. Last time Martha made a startling confession - that she understood Jesus to be the Christ, this time Mary performs a most controversial deed. A most lavish and some would say imprudent act. This time Bethany for Jesus is a place of safety; soon he will leave for Jerusalem, which will not be safe. The meal has some similarities with the one Jesus will celebrate a little later in Jerusalem with his disciples. Like the Last Supper there is foot washing, an act of great service and devotion. Judas is also present and we begin to learn he is a man torn, torn between doing good and acting out of self interest.

So, what do we know of those at the table? Lazarus, Martha and Mary are giving a dinner party in Jesus' honour. As Judas is present, I would suspect therefore that the other eleven disciples are also there.

Martha is one of the hosts. Like her sister Mary, she is no longer consumed by grief. She, like her siblings is close to Jesus. Since the raising of her brother, she has come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world, in short, she is a believer. Here Martha serves her guests, just like Jesus will in the story of the Last Supper.

Next, we have Lazarus. He is the only one who has died and lived to tell the story. Perhaps it is in gratitude to Jesus that this dinner party is being held in honour of him. Lazarus is the reason that a death plot surrounds Jesus.

Next, we have the disciples. They are silent observers; none of them complain about or agree with Judas, nor do any of them perform an act of devotion.

Judas on the other hand is far from silent. In this story quite a deal is revealed about Judas. What appears at first glance to be righteous indignation is revealed to be self-interest. Judas scolds Mary for her wastefulness and reminds all present that the perfume or oil was very valuable and should have been sold so that the money might be given to the poor. No doubt part of the mission of the historical Jesus was to give to the poor. However, we also discover that the other reason Judas was so outraged was that he was the treasurer, he managed the funds of the group. More than that, he was an embezzler, a thief. Clearly, he had ulterior motives, perhaps he protest too much. We are also told that he is about to betray Jesus. Judas likes the smell of money and it appears that it is money that is the motive behind a number of his actions. Let us not forget though that he is a follower of Jesus.

Then we have Mary. Mary who took an enormous jar of nard/perfume and washed Jesus' feet and then wiped them with her hair. This perfume would have been worth a fortune, Judas thought it could have been sold for 300 denarii, which would have been about one year's wages. The perfume was that which was used to embalm bodies, perhaps it was left over from Lazarus' funeral. She chose this moment to use it. It is hard to know what impulse had led to this act. Was she just incredibly grateful for all that Jesus had done for her family? Is it simply an act of love? Perhaps she knew that another death was imminent and that this moment marked a significant turning point in Jesus' life. Whatever the reason she simply doesn't care what anyone but Jesus thinks. She will not be silenced or stopped by Judas and his criticism. She courageously continues this lavish, generous and intimate act.

Notice how similar this act is to what Jesus does at the Last Supper when he washes the feet of the disciples as an example of the loving service to which they and we are called. This act of courageous love on Mary's part reveals her to be a true disciple. Whatever her reason, this controversial act is revealed by Jesus to be prophetic, an anointing for his burial. This act is an act of adoration, of love and of mourning. Joy and sorrow are all wrapped up in the one act.

So, what does Jesus, the guest of honour make of it all? He is quick to defend Mary and chastise Judas. Is he grieving his impending losses? Jesus makes it clear he sees this act of lavish devotion as being timely and appropriate. Lavish and wasteful much like the love shown by the father in our story of the two sons from last week. It is also a symbolic embalming; it is his anointing for burial. It is an act of loving discipleship.

We learn after the meal (not in today's reading) that the death plot has expanded and now includes both Jesus and Lazarus. We now know who will betray Jesus to the authorities. In a few days, Jesus will enter Jerusalem as he begins his journey to the cross. This meal has foreshadowed all the tensions of the next couple of weeks - devotion, betrayal, acclamation and death.

There are many parallels between Mary and Jesus. Both give themselves boldly in love. Both are characterised by extraordinary generosity and costly self-giving.

Mary gives us an example to follow – she responds to Jesus with extraordinary, abundant and generous devotion or love. She has offered hospitality, acknowledged pain and offered practical and beautiful care to Jesus.

To whom and how will we shower others with courageous and extraordinary love and care? To whom will we offer hospitality? What are the loving acts we can pour out in our locality? Or what kind of anointing can we pour out onto a troubled and grieving community? What balm can we offer the troubled and all who walk past our doors? What radical acts of devotion can we shower on our local community and each other to show we live another way – a way where love, care and peace rather than self-interest or political expediency reign.

I pray that our life together in this community might be characterised by such courageous generosity of spirit so that the world might become fragrant with the perfume of a loving God. Amen.