

Surprising Generosity

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church April 6th, 2025 – John 12:1-8)

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Do you remember those ‘How to Host a Murder’ parties that we used to have in the 1990’s. I used to live in a share house, and we held a few of them. They were usually heaps of fun – you were given some information about the character you would assume, you would dress up and as the meal progressed you discover a murder has happened, and bit by bit, people would reveal what they knew, these formed the clues to which you would solve the murder.

One of these dinners was memorable because the person who was the murderer fell asleep before dessert, making it impossible for us to continue the game.

Have you ever been at a memorable meal? Have you ever been at a meal, a party or an event when someone does something outrageous.

Meals can be memorable, not just because food is shared but also stories, joys and sorrows.

Jesus finds himself at a meal with friends which becomes pretty memorable. He is in Bethany at the home of his friends Martha, Lazarus and Mary. He has probably been there many times before, we get a sense in the gospels that he is close to this family. The last time he was there, was shortly after Lazarus had died, the women were grieving. Jesus, then, had miraculously raised Lazarus from the dead. This event gained Jesus a bit more of a following and made him popular. So popular, that some were hatching a plot to get rid of him.

There are some differences this time. Lazarus is alive and well. Martha has acknowledged herself as a believer, having made her confession of faith after Lazarus was raised.

Last time the women were worried about the stench that would come from Lazarus tomb when it was opened.

This house in Bethany, was a place of safety for Jesus. I am guessing that most of the disciples are present, at the very least, we know Judas is there.

So, there they are, enjoying a meal and each other’s company. Maybe for Jesus, this was a place where he could escape the crowds.

Out of nowhere, we find Mary doing something unusual. She has taken down a container of very expensive perfume and walked into the room with it. All eyes would have been on her, and then she does something extraordinary. She falls to her knees before Jesus, cracks open the jar of perfume, and then pours all of it (a bit more than a drink can) on Jesus’ feet, and begins to wash them, and then even more outrageously, dries his feet with her hair.

In Jewish houses it wasn’t unusual for someone to wash your feet, or at the very least provide water for that task. When one had to walk on dusty roads, feet got pretty dirty, so they were washed when entering a home. A bit like us taking off our shoes before we enter someone’s house.

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So, it wasn't the foot washing that would have been surprising, it was what Mary used, and perhaps the fact that a young woman got on her knees and washed them and then perhaps even more scandalous that she used her hair to dry his feet. I wonder why Mary did this. Was she just being a hospitable host and ensuring the guest feet were washed? That doesn't explain why she only washed Jesus's feet or why she used perfume worth thousands of dollars or why she used her hair instead of a towel to dry his feet.

Was this an act of gratitude? After all Jesus was a really good friend of the family and clearly had worked a miracle in their lives.

This act is lavish, is an act of servanthood, is intimate. Mary is taking a risk, did she worry about what the others would say or think? Did she wonder what Jesus would think? This is an act of generosity; this is an act of devotion.

Most of those gathered just sat there and said nothing. Were they just staring, gobsmacked? Were they shocked or surprised? Were they astonished and astounded?

Judas though couldn't help himself. Judging, intruding in the special moment, offering pious platitudes about the poor. His comments initially appear to be righteous indignation, scolding Mary for wasting expensive perfume that could have been sold and the money given to the poor. No doubt Jesus and his disciples did minister to the poor and thought that was important. However, we are told a little bit more about Judas. He is the treasurer of the group, perhaps that is why he is so outraged? Then we learn more, not only is he the treasurer, but he is a thief, and embezzles the group's funds, it appears he just might have an ulterior motive for wanting the perfume to sell. We need to note, the perfume was Mary's, and as such, up to her how she used it.

Jesus has just been sitting quietly, watching. Watching Mary as she performs her act of devotion. Watching as the disciples sit there and say nothing. None of them offered to wash his feet or anybody else's. None of them told her to stop. None of them stood up to Judas and defended Mary.

Jesus speaks, he defends Mary and her actions. He tells them that he understands this to be an anointing of him, before he faces what he must in Jerusalem. You see Jesus has a sense of what is coming, he knows many are plotting against him, but he wants to go to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, but it will not be a place of safety for him. The next part of his journey will be dangerous, and he knows there are some, who would like to see him dead.

Is this what Mary understood her act to be about? Did she mean it as an anointing for burial, or was it just a generous act of hospitality and devotion to the one who had changed her life? Is she ready for what is going to happen next? Is she ready to let Jesus go?

The house was filled with the smell of the expensive perfume, it was to be shared by everyone, it wasn't just for a rich person who could afford to buy it and use it, and the proceeds of such a sale be syphoned off by a thief.

Does the perfume over power the stench of corruption, fear and impending death?

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Mary has shown herself to be a disciple of Jesus, one who practices loving service, one who shows herself to be devoted to Jesus, one who is generous.

The anointing of Jesus for his impending death is here done by a woman, not a prophet or a priest, a woman, in an act of gratitude. This is an act of symbolic embalming, is done by a woman generously, lavishly, with no expense spared.

As the Passover approaches, we find Jesus doing something similar, to his disciples, where he too gets on his knees in an act of service and washes the feet of his friends. An act that he says symbolises what it means to be a follower, to serve others.

There are many similarities between Mary and Jesus. Both give of themselves boldly in love. Both give of themselves completely in the service of others. Both show generous hospitality to others. Both show abundant care to others.

Where do you find yourself in the story?

Do you identify with Lazarus who must have had mixed emotions, given a second chance at life, but is also the reason that others are plotting to kill Jesus?

Do you identify with Martha, the practical one with a gift for hospitality, but also a woman of great faith who knows that Jesus is the Messiah for whom they have waited, the liberator for whom they prayed? Just no sure how it will all pan out.

Do you identify with Judas, a bit too ready to criticise, prone to sell out another for money or prestige? Drawn into the games of others and unable to find a way out?

We are called to be like Mary and Jesus.

We need to discern whom we are called to shower with extraordinary love and care? To whom shall we offer hospitality? To whom should we be offering the balm of God's love?

What outrageous and risky acts will we do to show God's love? Who and how shall we serve as an act of devotion to our God? Are we ready to replace our self-interest with the self-emptying love of God?

As we move closer to Easter, spend some time remembering Mary and her surprising act of generous love and devotion. I pray that our life together in this community, might be characterised by such generosity of spirit, so that the world might become fragrant with the perfume of a loving God. Amen.