

John 12:1-8 “Whatever gains I have”

The poet Louisa Tarkington writes:

*I wish there was some wonderful place;
In the Land of beginning again;
Where all our mistakes and all our heartaches;
And all of our poor selfish grief;
Could be dropped like a shabby old coat at the
door;
And never put on again!*

Singer, song writer Chuck Girard writes:

*Lay your burden down, lay your burden down
Take your troubled soul, your tired mind
And lay your burden down
Lay your burden down, get your feet on solid ground
Take your worries to the foot of the cross,
and lay your burden down.*



The Israelites have been remembering how God rescued them from slavery in Egypt and brought them to the promised land. Now, they have been enslaved again, captives in the land of Babylon. Their country, their homes, their holy city and the temple of Yahweh have all been destroyed – and the people were hauled off, unceremoniously, to live in a foreign land, under foreign rule. While reminding them of the dramatic rescue from the pursuing Egyptian army, centuries before, God now promises that he is doing a new thing with them, for them. The former things, awesome as they were, are to be forgotten, because God is moving ahead of them. Again God will lead them home. Even the wilderness and the desert will have water and rivers. Even the wild animals will stand amazed at God’s power and mercy, at God’s lavish goodness to God’s people.

In John’s gospel, we meet Jesus on the final leg of his journey to Jerusalem and Calvary. It’s the week of the Passover and Jesus comes to Bethany, to the home of Lazarus. During dinner, Martha serves, predictably. And while Jesus, Lazarus, the disciples and the other guests eat, Mary comes, kneels at Jesus’ feet and anoints him, washes his feet with perfume the cost of which was easily that of an entire year’s salary. Then in an act of utter devotion, despite the condemnation and judgement of those who were watching, she dries his feet with her hair.

Frank Ramirez says, “Secretly I’m on Judas’ side on this one. You probably don’t want to admit it, but so are you. He points out that 300 days’ salary had just been cracked open and wasted on Jesus. Well, not wasted. Yeah, wasted. Because once that expensive perfume was used it couldn’t be used again. It was a limited, one time resource. Can you imagine the good that could have been done for the poor? Try to imagine what our church could do if someone donated one year’s worth of salary out of the blue! ...

What was Mary thinking? A jar of perfume worth 300 days’ wages? Take away the sabbath and that’s pretty much a year’s salary.”¹

¹Frank Ramirez in “No Pleasing Some People”

Yet, Jesus defends Mary. “Leave her alone,” Jesus says. He knows that her actions are lavish and extravagant. But he also knows that she loves him, is totally devoted to him, and that she senses that he is going to die. This is not disregard for the poor. In every story, every teaching, Jesus sides with the poor and the disenfranchised. In every story, every teaching, Jesus calls his followers to share, to protect, to make sacrifices for the poor, the people with no voice, those who are hurting in any way. He’s told them and shown them with everything he says and does that whenever they do something for the sake of one of the least of society, they are doing it for him, to him. [cf. Matthew 25]

When Mary pours out her love and adoration, her devotion and complete loyalty, Jesus doesn’t stop her because he knows that from his love for her and hers for him, she will serve and care for all for whom he came. Generosity from ourselves will eventually run out. Generosity because we are loved by God, so much so that he gave his only son for us ... that generosity will multiply and grow with every act of kindness we offer.

There’s a story from the time during the Great Depression when Fiorello LaGuardia, later to become mayor of New York City, served as a police court judge. One cold winter’s day they brought a man to him who was charged with stealing a loaf of bread. LaGuardia asked him if he was guilty. The man nodded. He had taken the bread because his family was starving and he had no money to buy food.

What was LaGuardia to do? The law bound him. “I’ve got to punish you,” he told the man. “The law makes no exceptions! I fine you \$10!” And he brought down his gavel.

Since the man had no money for the fine, he thought they would surely throw him in jail!

However, LaGuardia wasn’t finished. In fact, he already had his hand on his wallet. He pulled out a ten-dollar bill, handed it to the bailiff, and said: “Here’s the money for the fine.” Then he took back the ten-dollar bill, put it into his hat, handed the hat to the bailiff, and said, “I’m going to suspend the sentence and I’m going to fine everyone here in the courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a man has to steal bread in order to eat!”

When the man left the courtroom that day he had the light of life in his eyes and \$47.50 in his pocket!

Frank Honeycutt pulls no punches when he puts Mary’s act of devotion beside ours. He says, “Maybe Mary goes overboard in honouring Jesus. Maybe she overdoes it. That is not really our modern problem, though, is it? Our problem is usually underdoing it -- a paltry, miserly response. Taking Jesus for granted. Going days without consulting him in prayer, assuming he’s aware of our gratitude and thankfulness. Rightly seeking to help and serve poor people but neglecting the primary relationship with Jesus that keeps sending us into the world to wash feet. Giving lip-service to the importance of honouring the man in order to get on with the real business of the church.

[He continues] “Mary’s gift was both “costly” and extravagant, even lavish. She was overcome with joy and thankfulness. Maybe she overdid it. On a Friday afternoon so many years ago, Jesus offered his own costly and extravagant gift. Pray that we will not ‘underdo’ it as we seek to honour him in our lives this Lent.”²

²Frank Honeycutt in “Costly Extravagance”