

Over-the-top love

Mark 14:3-9

July 31, 2016

Last January 7th,
in the very final hours of our church mission trip to India,
we were squeezing in one last visit,
one last chance to be with the children of the slums whom we had grown to love so much.
Our host, our mission partner, TL Reddy,
was taking us one last time to visit with kids on our School on Wheels,
a traveling classroom that goes from slum to slum.
The ten of us crammed into two cars, and drove a long while along one of the big highways
leading into the city of Hyderabad.
The highway, like all of them, was lined with huts,
makeshift homes constructed of plastic sheets stretched over whatever scrap wood could be
found.
And after a time, we pulled off, and there, parked behind those ramshackle huts, was the
familiar sight of that yellow school bus, the school on wheels.
Kids scrambled off the bus to greet us excitedly,
and from the huts all around emerged women,
tidying their sarees and grinning broadly at us.
These were **their** children we had come to see.

We had brought supplies for the kids, books and crayons and such,
but what made their eyes go as wide as their smiles
were the beach balls we brought.
There were enough for each of them to have one,
which was in itself astonishing to them.
And with their mothers watching,
we blew up the balls and we started to play.
We played made-up games of keep away and variations on volleyball and anything we could
think of, while the moms smiled and clapped with delight.
Until -- the moms got tired of just watching.
All of a sudden, they all rushed forward, all talking excitedly,
and they grabbed our hands,
and pulled us into a circle,
a dozen women in sarees and us,
and we began to dance.

Or rather, they began to dance while we tried to figure out the dance.
They moved with such grace, arms and hips going as we circled around --
We didn't.

I have some pretty hysterical pictures of our teenage boys in various contortions, their faces wrinkled in concentration.

But it didn't matter. It was joy. It was sheer joy.

And as we were finally about to leave,
one of the moms began speaking to us urgently, beckoning to us.

She wanted us to visit her home.

Which was to say, her hut, her hut made of scraps of tarp pulled over a frame.

And so we did --

we ducked our heads and entered her home.

She had swept the dirt floor for us -- she had places for all of us to sit, from a crate turned upside down to plastic chairs she'd found or borrowed.

And after we'd taken our seats, then proudly she gave each one of us a bottle of soda to drink.

Then she brought us each a plate piled high with cookies.

And as our kids gratefully sipped their sodas, and munched the cookies,
all I could think about was how much she had spent on all this.

And I couldn't bear it.

"TL," I said to our friend, "please tell her that I want to give her some money for all this."

"Shh," he said, "no, no. It's her gift, it's her gift. No money."

So I nibbled my cookie and sipped my soda, but I knew what each soda cost, and I thought of the rice she could have gotten instead,
and I could barely stand to take the food.

And then, then she brought out a gift to give me.

A little statue of Ganesh, the elephant God.

"Oh, no," I said to TL, "this is too much, this is too much."

"It's her gift," he said again, "It's her thanks. Take it."

So I took it.

And she smiled with delight, and we all thanked her effusively,
and then we got up to leave.

And you know what I did? Right before we got back in the car,
I ran back and I made her take some money from me.

So I would feel better.

So I would feel better.

The gift of grace poured out upon us.
Love lavished upon me.
And I didn't accept it for what it was.

The kids got it.
Their so-called leader didn't. Until it was too late.

On the plane home,
the scripture story I thought of was the story Greg just read to you.
It's a beautiful story,
but for many people it's been a perplexing story.
For people who, like me, don't get that sometimes there's just grace.

Here's what happens.

Jesus is out to dinner with friends,
his buddy Simon has invited him and his followers over for a meal,
and everyone's happily drinking the wine and chatting away.

And then this happens:

in walks a woman whose name we will *never know*,
and she's carrying a jar -- a jar of what the bible says is VERY costly oil,
some stuff called nard.

Worth, the story says, about 25 thousand dollars,
which, coincidentally, is about what a gallon of Chanel number 5 now goes for.

So that's what she's got. A gallon jar of Chanel.

And she goes over to Jesus, and gently, tenderly,
pours it on him, anoints him with it.

And everyone there flips out.

All of Jesus' friends.

"That is craaaazy -- do you have any idea how much that stuff costs?"

"Oh my God, she just poured her retirement money all over the floor."

"If she wanted to do something nice for Jesus, she could have sold that nard, we could have fed poor people from Jerusalem to Galilee."

Of course, they're right. Technically.

But what does Jesus say?

"Leave her alone," he says.

"She has done a beautiful thing.
She has done a beautiful thing for me."

Jesus knew grace when he saw it.
And Jesus knew to delight in it.
Jesus knew love when he saw it.
And Jesus knew to rejoice in it.

Sure, the disciples were "right" that this woman didn't need to be anointing Jesus with nard -- they were "right" in the same way I was "right" that a woman in a hut in a slum didn't need to be giving me gifts.

But neither they -- nor I --
recognized grace happening right in front of us.
Love poured out all around us.

Yes, the woman's gift was extravagant.

But what Jesus recognized,
and what he was honoring, praising, thanking God for,
what he was *accepting*,
was the extravagance of her **love**.

He was accepting her love in all its extravagance,
a love given with spontaneous delight and joy and generosity.

That woman -- whose name we do not know, but whom Jesus praised like praised no one else --

that woman gave the best gift she could give because she loved Jesus.

She risked looking ridiculous because she loved Jesus.

She gave wildly out of proportion, insanely and extravagantly
because she loved Jesus

and she wanted him to know that he was loved.

It was extravagant, all right -- it was crazy --

but what was given extravagantly was love.

It was her love that was extravagant.

And Jesus **knew** something about extravagant love,
because it was how he gave love, too.

Abundantly, without measure, overflowing, love given to people no one else loved,
love given where it wouldn't be given back,

love given to outcasts,
love given while people in power looked on and frowned.
Love given constantly, extravagantly.
And what Jesus knew that night and what we know now
is that his love, a few days later, was going to cost him his life.
And if that's not extravagant love, I don't know what is:
love given so generously to others that it costs everything.

That's how we're supposed to love.
Like that woman did,
and like the woman in a saree in a hut in a slum did.
With extravagance and sheer grace.
Out of all normal proportion, unendingly, love that spills over everything,
love that just keeps loving.

Which means giving love to the point where you risk looking foolish.
Giving love when you have no expectation of getting something back.
Giving love to people that other people think you're crazy to love.
Giving love as if it was never going to run out.
Because the fact is, if you give love that way, it won't run out.
If you give love extravagantly, the well never runs dry.

I thought a lot about love yesterday morning,
early yesterday morning.
About 6 a.m., to be precise.
I took myself down to the grounds of the Hunt Club in Westport,
where thousands upon thousands of people were gathering
to bike the Connecticut Challenge.
biking 10, 25, 50 even 100 miles
to support all those who are battling cancer,
and all those who have loved someone who battled.
There were dozens upon dozens of our church people there,
and I just wanted to be there to see them and to hug them and to wish them well and to
rejoice in what they were doing.
And truth be told, I just wanted to be in a place where love was palpable.

The Challenge, I think you know, was created by our own Jeff Keith,
who has been on a thirty-year journey to care for those with cancer

and those who have survived.

Literally it's been a journey:

in 1985, after childhood cancer took one of his legs,

Jeff undertook a remarkable journey: He ran across America -- *ran* across America -- to raise awareness of cancer's toll on children.

Honestly, when I came to this church in 1989, what impressed me most was that this was Jeff Keith's church.

And now the Challenge,

the work he shares alongside Karin and all his wonderful family in this church,

work born in compassion and hope, and extravagant love.

That's what I felt yesterday morning.

That's what I saw in the faces of people who were there to push themselves hard to do the work of love.

And you knew, you knew that for each person there, there was somebody they loved whose face would be before them as they rode.

I saw a great gathering of people who were riding for Beth Davis, our Beth, whom we loved so dearly and who left us two years ago.

My friend Beth, who traveled with me into those slums of India, who taught a group of adoring Indian kids how to play frisbee, whose laughter was matched by their own.

Beth loved extravagantly --

from her students at Mercy Learning Center to those lucky enough to be her friends to her family who adored her.

And so yesterday the ones who cherished her had gathered for some extravagant loving of their own.

And I saw the Richards kids,

riding together in love, for Sally, their mom, who was ours to cherish on this earth until six years ago.

Sally could make me laugh until I snorted; giggle until my sides hurt.

And Sally, too, loved extravagantly --

from the patients she nursed, to the students she taught, to the friends she adored, and the family she delighted in.

So there they were yesterday to love her back extravagantly, there they were, doing the work of love for someone who was herself non-stop love.

To be present in that place yesterday was to see grace at work everywhere,
to feel love poured out extravagantly everywhere you looked.

That's kind of how the world is meant to be, really.

A place where we do the work of love because we know ourselves to be loved.

A place where we all give love as that woman long ago gave:

extravagantly, without measuring the cost,

extravagantly, gracefully, in the true sense of that word:

grace - fully.

What a world that would be --

a world filled with compassion

and over-the-top of love.

A world like that, you might call The Kingdom of God.

I keep the statue of the god Ganesh that the woman gave me
on my mantelpiece at home.

I keep it to remind myself of grace and extravagant love.

I keep it in memory of her.

And because the scripture story tells us

that the last thing Jesus says to his disciples

as the perfume runs across the floor,

as he accepts the grace he's been given and the extravagance of that woman's love --

the last thing he says to them is this:

Wherever the good news is told, he says,

it will be told in memory of her.

*Wherever my story is told **it will be told in memory of her.***

In memory of her, we tell the story of Love.

In memory of her, we love with abandon.

In memory of her, we love as if we were Christ's very heart in this world --

because we **are** --

extravagantly, grace-fully, without limit.

Amen.