

## ***Audacious Love***

**John 12:1-8**

Sometimes a good story is best understood by another. A few years ago, on one of my trips to Chiapas, our small group was up in the highlands in the village of Marravillas, over four hours by pickup truck along windy mountain roads from San Cristóbal de las Casas where SIM (Seminario Intercultural Mayense) is situated. In this mountainside village, we felt a million miles away from home.

Ricardo Mayol, in his ineffable style, decided at the last minute I would preach the sermon for a worship he was quickly arranging among the folks gathered there. He would translate into Spanish, which many of them would know, even though their native tongue is Tzotzil, a Mayan dialect. One might assume preachers are naturals at speaking off the cuff, however, on that particular day my head was dead, my mind was paralyzed, likely due to the fatigue of travel. With a certain degree of panic, I quickly thumbed through my pocket Bible to find a message to stir the hearts of those gathered and prevent cardiac arrest in mine.

When Ricardo called on me to preach, I was still thumbing through the pages, undecided what to do. So I pulled out an old preachers' trick: when in doubt, read the longest passage you can find. So I turned to the Gospel of John and asked Ricardo to read the entire chapter 11—the story of Lazarus' rising from the dead—which conveniently runs over fifty verses in length. I figured that would take him at least ten minutes to convey it with his characteristic dramatic flair, which would buy me enough time to pray my brain back into gear.

For better or for worse, my plaintive prayer was answered. As Ricardo was reading this epic drama, it dawned on me that this was a story

about the very people sitting in front of me. The name, Lazarus, means “one whom God helps.” It’s a derivative of the Hebrew name, Eleazar, which also happened to be the name of Eleazar Encino Perez, one of our Mayan companions from SIM. As I’ve said here many times before, in the gospels, the character, Lazarus, functions parabolically as a generic metaphor for the poor and the afflicted of the world. The Lazaruses of this world are those who suffer greatly, often giving into despair. They miss out on the abundant blessings and confidence in life others enjoy, simply because they were born in the wrong place, or at the wrong time, or with the wrong luck, or around the wrong people—ones who sense little hope in their present life. In my limited introduction to Marravillas, I grasped these hopeless folks perfectly. I was ready to deliver an inspired message—something they would never forget!

Not surprisingly, many who turn to the story of Lazarus for inspiration think that John only meant it to be a foreshadowing of Jesus’ resurrection—that it provides anecdotal evidence of Jesus’ Elijah-like power to raise the dead and to forecast the promise of eternal life—the standard evangelical hope of the Christian Gospel. Frankly, every one of my immediate listeners in Marravillas would anticipate the same—for me to preach passionately about the great expectations of the Gospel message—those who will live again, even though they die, as the text so beautifully puts it. They had heard it before: repent today and seek God’s forgiveness to receive the gracious assurance that, when you die, you will be promised Paradise—that life will be better in the “sweet by-and-by.” God may not deliver these poor Marravillans from their present problems, but they could be sure, once they die, the gates of heaven will open and a mansion will be awaiting them! This would have been expected in a faraway place like

Marravillas, where there is little hope for a better life than what they already experience in their poverty.

However, the inspired Paul (and passionate Ricardo) told them this: They are like Lazarus, the ones whom God helps! Christ is calling back to life the poor and suffering of this world—those who have been deemed unimportant and expendable by the powers of this world—whose lives matter little, especially when they get in the way of economic progress—those who have little hope in this world. He was raising them from the dead, not to another life, but back into this one! Jesus will raise them out of their social and political tombs and breathe new life into them and fill them with his Spirit—just like Lazarus! The destiny of the poor will not be silenced by their graves!

I was on fire; I was speaking to the heart of their condition there in the highlands of southern Mexico, where their lands are confiscated by the government or rich landowners, or exploited by global pharmaceutical companies seeking new remedies for the rest of the world. I anticipated their eyes widening with sudden interest and their hearts pounding with excitement, finding a new hope in their faith—one that would lead toward a positive transformation of their lives. I was certain I was reading from the scrolls of Amos and Isaiah, preaching the Jubilee with a Christ-like vision—that Christ was calling them out of the hopelessness of their lives with a renewed commitment for justice for them and all the poor of Chiapas!

But when I was finished, ready for an altar call of my own, all I got in return were angry stares. No affirmation at all. What I preached was inspiring to me, but not to them. I was making Jesus into someone they didn't want to hear about. They didn't want to be a political cause; they wanted to experience love in their lives. I don't think they even cared for

my rather arrogant assumption that they were poor. As far as they were concerned, the “poor ones” of Marravillas weren’t any different than people everywhere else. The gospel which emboldened me toward social justice wasn’t the same message that inspired them. Here, I wanted to see them rise up and seek a better life, to change their circumstances and prospects toward a fairer and more equitable living standard. They wanted less stress on their lives and more love in their hearts and relationships. The truth be told, I would preach them a sermon about how I viewed them from my vantage point and then walk away from their poverty; they couldn’t leave it, nor did they compare their lives to mine, and so they wouldn’t listen to what I had to say.

Now I don’t know who was right and who was wrong on that particular day, but it became abundantly clear to me that Jesus means many different things to many different people in many different circumstances. The word of God isn’t merely a social gospel, as I’m inclined to emphasize. Nor is it just a gospel for self-preservation—as revivalists usually present it. The proclamation and ministry of Jesus is not limited to personal redemption or justice; it’s also about building community, it’s about fostering love in relationships, it’s about finding meaning, it’s about acting ethically, it’s about offering compassion and mercy, it’s about healing and wholeness, it’s about embracing selfless service, it’s about finding one’s spirit centered in God. It’s about many different things, with a wide variety of emphases (at times with competing claims), and endless connecting points that will resonate with the human soul; and people the world over will vary in their interpretation and connection to its proclamation and its application for their lives. This happens as part of a larger cloud of witnesses which covers the landscape of human life—all of us connected to

the source, but expressing and emphasizing differing aspects of reality and truth. As I see it, that's part of the story behind the story of our text today, which immediately follows the lengthy tale of Lazarus' rise from the dead.

When we look at this passage about the anointing of Jesus, it's one of the few narratives that shows up in all four gospels. Except, the story is told differently by each of the Gospel writers—each with their own emphases. In Matthew and Mark, the episode takes place in Simon the leper's house in Bethany, where the woman is unnamed and anonymous. In Luke, it takes place in a rich Pharisee's home in the Galilean village of Nain, where she's a nameless woman from the street, referred to as a "sinner." In John, it occurs back in Bethany as well, but in the home of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha, where Mary is the woman in question.

But it's not just these details that differ. In Matthew and Mark, the woman pours ointment upon Jesus' head, much like a priest would be anointed for service. In Luke and John, she stands behind Jesus anointing his feet with oil and wiping them off with her hair. In Luke, the woman is weeping; in John, Mary takes a pound of nard and lovingly caresses and perfumes his feet.

Yet, in all four accounts there is one common denominator—one universal response: the reaction to Jesus' anointing is hostile—in total or in part. In three of them, the negative reaction came from disciples who claimed it was a waste of a valuable commodity, arguing that the expensive ointment, nard, or perfume (or even the alabaster jar itself) could have been sold for a large sum of money and the money could have been used to aid the poor. The righteous indignation voiced was that Jesus allowed this reckless waste as an audacious act of indulgence.

In full-disclosure, I have to admit, I probably would have been one of them. What about the poor? We see so many misuses of valuable resources in religious circles, in charities, in government, and in society as a whole that appear to me a terrible waste—where funds could be better served to help those who really need it, rather than to satisfy the indulgence of a few (e.g., Wounded Warriors Project).

A classic case I recall from many years ago was when a church in one of the most poverty stricken neighborhoods of a nearby city received a bequest and used the proceeds to purchase a gold-plated microphone for the pulpit. At the time, I was involved in inner-city ministry and couldn't believe it. For years, I harped on it as a stereotypical example of self-indulgent Christians, who demonstrated a callous lack of concern for neighbors (it still irks me!). Yet, there are many examples of this in houses of worship and religious shrines everywhere we go! How can we, in all conscience, take precious resources to adorn buildings or to pay for pompous events that are extravagant, ostentatious, and downright offensive when there are so many poor living among us in the world? I'm not alone. That is one of the devastating criticisms leveled at the Christian church by a society that's increasingly cynical of religious hypocrisy.

This was the legitimate complaint of the disciples (or Judas) in the story for the expensive perfume being wasted on Jesus. It was a surprising, imprudent and excessive act of devotion by the woman in question.

Yet, if I would allow myself to get down from the prophetic soapbox for a moment to imagine the heart of this woman (whomever she may be), I would realize she was offering a deeply meaningful expression of love toward the one who had transformed this woman's life and condition. If it was Mary, it was out of deep, profound gratitude for Jesus bringing her

brother, Lazarus, back to life. If it was a condemned sinner from the streets as in Luke's version, it was a reciprocal act of mercy to one who loved and valued her, enough to redeem her dignity and status in the world.

Even if the motivations behind it were unknown, it could be anything across the vast spectrum of reasons for why people are drawn to Jesus and his message, regardless if we agree with or even grasp the rationale for such extravagant love. Sometimes, people reach a point in their life where the only appropriate response to divine love and human mercy is to express audacious love and adoration—just to symbolize in some tangible way their profound gratitude—just to demonstrate what God has done!

If we are wise and empathetic and try to discern people's motivations instead of judge them upfront, if we avoid preconceived notions of what we believe is true about others, we will realize that, at some level, we are all poor or poor in spirit. Yes, it's true, a central purpose of the Church is to serve the poor—that's our mission, that's our calling—the poor will always be with us, as Jesus said, because we will always be *with them*, if we are truly following the teachings of Christ. But ministering to the needs of the poor, as universal as this should be, is not all that our faith inspires.

When people express their deepest gratitude to God, it will appear in a myriad of ways—often indulgent and extravagant—always worthy of the depth of love and appreciation in response to God's goodness. The artist will present her greatest work; the woodworker his best effort. Musicians will want to perform perfectly; composers will present their most magnificent piece; teachers will provide their consummate lessons; compassionate souls will dedicate themselves to offer sacrificial care, and the Marys of the world will bring their alabaster jars to anoint the Jesus they love. Gratitude doesn't need to be criticized or judged—it brings out

the best in people at all levels of their consciousness and character. Audacious love is reciprocal with God in whatever way it is best expressed.

This isn't to say that Judas or any of the critics weren't right. The valuable oil could have been sold and the money given to the poor. That would have been a good thing. That also would have been a Christian thing to do. But as I discovered on a mountainside in Chiapas, people are people, with all of our mixed and varied needs; no one wants to be reduced to a stereotype, viewed merely as a *cause célèbre*—a social justice project to enervate people like me to right the wrongs of the world. Sometimes, they just want to be loved like anybody else and to express their love as indulgently as they wish, regardless of how it appears to others.

Perhaps, we all need to know that God will redeem us someday, to right the wrongs of life, even if we can only hope for it in the present. The truth be told, in Marravillas, neither of us were wrong; in the story, each in their own way, Judas and Mary both got it right.

As we go through life, if humility and mercy characterize our outlook, wisdom teaches us there are no clean, distinct lines between rights and wrongs—at least as much as we might perceive. That's why stereotypes don't explain people's true motivations. Our opinions and views and beliefs are always incomplete—we can only see things “through a glass darkly,” as Paul so aptly phrased it.

In the end of that beautiful poem in I Corinthians 13, much like the centerpiece of this story, what holds us together in our differences of belief, practice, perspective, or circumstances is grateful love—audacious love—expressed each in our own way—remarkable, extravagant, merciful, and generous, as it should be.

And with an empathetic, Christ-like spirit, that is something no one can deny.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes  
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT  
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