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The Message: Christian Beauty

When I look at a text, I try to hear what it says to me -- to bring my sin to the text so to speak, to seek wisdom from the text to meet my brokenness. In doing that, perhaps you will be able to see your brokenness in light of the message of scripture. Sometimes I think, when I run out of sins, I won't have anything left to say – but it appears I have at least 30 years worth of sins!!

For instance, in the passage from John about Mary anointing Jesus' feet. I find myself squarely in one particular role: it could have been written for me. Unfortunately, it's the role of Judas. I'm the one who is often asking the question, couldn't we spend this money on something more useful? Instead of the generosity of Mary, I often find myself displaying the greed of Judas.

What happened at Jesus' anointing in Bethany has plagued the followers of Jesus from then until now. How much do we spend on ourselves and how much do we give to missions? Couldn't we do more good by giving all this money to the poor instead of spending it on, say, a new building?

The chaplain at Duke University, tells of the time the faculty of Duke was discussing a proposal to renovate the seminary chapel. They had received a modest proposal from the architect. But, would the chapel be renovated? "No. With all the poverty and hunger in the world," said one faculty member, "how can we as Christians justify spending \$50,000 to pretty-up our chapel?" Of course, this person failed to offer similar objections when faculty salaries were raised each year, (a figure that collectively greatly exceeds \$50,000) nor does he question the morality of the luxurious faculty lounge. Obviously the man was posturing, just as Judas was posturing.

Judas and far too many of us talk about fiscal responsibility when it is really a cover up for our own greed so that we can have more money for ourselves and our pleasures. That was Judas' problem: greed, plain and simple. And that may be a problem for us as well.

What Jesus is saying and Mary is demonstrating is that Sometimes it's O.K. to be extravagant, sometimes it's ok to focus on beauty!

The Christian church has a history of ambivalence toward beauty. There are hundreds of years when the beauty of art, music and architecture created the cathedrals of Europe, thousands of works of art and a tradition of great sacred music which attest to a great devotion to beauty. At times, a feeling that the physical is a distraction from things of the spirit dominates.

Protestant churches inherited a tendency towards minimalism as a reaction to the extravagant tradition of Catholic art. No candles or crosses on communion tables, large works of art were replaced by smaller ones or none at all.

Let's look back to Mary.

Jesus is on His way to the cross. It is just a few days before Passover. Judas is about ready to betray Him. The crucifixion is less than a week away and Jesus knows it. Jesus and His disciples stop at Bethany. Now, as they are having dinner, a woman comes to Jesus and does a beautiful but extravagant thing. Mary brings an alabaster jar of very expensive ointment. She breaks open the jar and pours the costly perfumed oil on Jesus' head. She anoints His head with oil.

Why did she do that? Some say it was an act of gratitude in which she was thanking Jesus for raising her brother Lazarus from the dead. Some say it was a way to encourage Jesus to go into the Holy City and do what had to be done. Others say it was a foreshadowing, an act of preparation, in which she was anointing His body for the death which was to come in Jerusalem a few days later. All say it was an act of love and kindness.

But Judas said it was a waste. If you lived strictly by the Judas mind-set, you would have no Spire on the church, no flowers on the altar, no art on the wall, no fine organ, no beautiful weddings. Your daughter would come to you and say, "I'm in love and I'm so happy. I want to get married." And you would say, "Well, why don't you just elope? It's much cheaper. It would be wasteful to have a wedding." But the Mary mindset says, "Sometimes in the name of love and kindness and gratefulness, it's O.K. to focus on beauty. Indeed, it's beautiful to be extravagant."

Christians like us who believe in working for justice for others often struggle with using our resources for things of beauty. When my previous church started to put stained glass windows into our church, there were folk who didn't want to contribute and really didn't want others to. But what we all learned was that generosity breeds generosity: that if people are generous, they are generous in all things. So while we raised funds for the windows, we also raised funds for Mission and Service, for heat and light and repairs, and among other good works, we supported a family of children in South Africa who had lost their parents to AIDS.

To Be Extravagant In Our Generosity.
It's O.k. To Be Extravagant In Our Gratitude.

As the churches have evolved, we have become more open. Where some Protestants dressed in sombre black and allowed no colour in the chancel, now candles, flowers, liturgical colours -- like the purple on the cross and the minister, a symbol of both suffering and royalty, which hangs on the cross during Lent, which turns to black on Good Friday, and white on Easter. Mary brings beauty to Jesus.

Mary gives her very best for Jesus; I am called to do the same. It goes against the grain, because I am naturally more like Judas. Jesus' forgiveness transforms me, though. Through his extravagant forgiveness I can step out of the role of Judas and into the role of Mary. And when you do, when you do spend foolishly to turn on a light in someone else's eyes, there is a fulfillment beyond satisfaction. We experience the extravagance of Christ's love for us.

Beauty and goodness are not choices. They exist within one another. And if we look at the world with God's eyes, we will know what is truly beautiful and what is truly ugly.

Open yourself to Beauty -- Remind yourself that Beauty is a gift of God only surpassed by the beauty of Christ's sacrificial love -- a redemptive gift -- and that it is Good. Smell beauty in the air -- be enveloped by it, and let Beauty guide your life to the Good.