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Mark 14:3-9  
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## **A Most Extravagant Gift!**

A woman woke up one morning, turned to her husband and said, "Honey, I just had a dream that you bought me a new gold necklace. What do you think it means?"

He said, "I don't know, but your birthday is coming soon. Then you'll know."

A few nights later, she again woke up after having a dream. She said, "This time, I dreamed you gave me a pearl necklace. What do you think that means?"

"You'll know on your birthday," he replied.

The morning of her birthday, she again woke up telling him about her dream: "This time I dreamed that you brought me a diamond necklace. What do you think it means?"

"Honey, be patient," he said. "You'll know tonight."

That evening, the husband came home with a package and gave it to his wife. Delighted, she opened it – and found a book titled, "The Meaning of Dreams."

Clearly, this woman's love language is "gifts".

So far, in our sermon series, we have covered the love languages of words of affirmation, physical touch, quality time, and today, we will look more closely at the love language of giving and receiving gifts.

Gift giving can be found in every culture; it is a fundamental expression of love that transcends all cultural barriers.

For example, most wedding ceremonies include the giving and receiving of rings.

Of course, visual symbols of love are more important to some than to others.

Take children for example. If you give gifts to a child, and the gifts are quickly laid aside, and the child rarely says, “thank you”, and the child does not take care of the gift that you give to him or her, chances are that “receiving gifts” is not his or her love language.

If, on the other hand, the child responds with thankfulness, shows off the gift to friends and family, puts the gift in a prominent place in his or her room, and takes good care of the gift, then maybe “receiving gifts” is her or his love language.

Although, gifts are physical reminders of our love, it’s not about being materialistic.

It’s not so much about the thing itself, or how much it costs. Can’t buy me love – right?—despite what Valentine’s Day and jewelry commercials try to convey.

True gifts are physical expressions of thoughtfulness. When the gift can be seen, one is instantly reminded of the thought and effort behind it. Gifts communicate thoughtful love.

A gift is something you can hold in your hand and say, "Look, he was thinking of me," or, "She remembered me."

Aww, but it's true, you have to be thinking of someone to give them a gift. The gift itself is a symbol of that thought.

It doesn't matter whether it costs money; what's important is that you thought of them.

Probably the most memorable gift I gave my mom was when I was a freshman in high school.

I was taking a woodshop class and I made the ugliest wooden knife set holder you have ever seen.

I gave it to my mom for Christmas and she proudly put it up on the wall in the kitchen, just next to the cabinets.

She didn't love it because it was so well made (obviously), she loved it because I made it for her.

As mentioned before, gifts do not need to be expensive. But the woman in our scripture passage today shares a most expensive gift with Jesus.

She gives the gift of a very expensive oil called Spikenard – you? It was one of the last oils Jesus received before going to the cross.

True confession: Until this week, I had never heard of Spikenard. I guess I've lived a sheltered life.

Anyway, I found out that Spikenard is an oil extracted from the root of a nard plant, grown in India. Its going rate was 300 denarii, which was equivalent to a year's salary.

Since it was so valuable, it was often carried in an alabaster jar. The alabaster itself being a valuable work of art.

Alabaster was a soft stone, imported from Egypt into Palestine, especially popular for storing perfume and ointments. It was light and creamy in color.

Those who have studied ancient customs tell us prostitutes of that day often wore a vial of this perfume hanging by a cord around their necks.

In a culture where bathing was infrequent, a drop or two would be used to entice prospective customers. But this woman brings, not simply a vial, but an entire alabaster jar.

It is this spikenard that the woman in today's gospel passage pours over Jesus' head.

First, this woman walks into Simon's home, uninvited. It was a preposterous, scandalous, tenacious act, to say the least. I mean, who did she think she was?

Without hesitation, she snaps the long neck off of the alabaster jar, the oil dripping onto her hands.

Then she raises the bottle and extravagantly tips its contents fully on Jesus' hair.

The fragrant perfume oozing down his temples, his cheeks, his neck, his chest, comforting him with love when it mattered to him most.

This was a spiritually intimate act, but also very, very socially inappropriate.

Still, Jesus lifts his gaze and his eyes meets her eyes with gratitude, with kindness, with a smile.

I wonder whether the scent of that fragrant oil lingered in the air just a few days later when Jesus was on the cross. I wonder whether that scent brought comfort to his weary soul.

And did you notice, when the woman gave Jesus her gift, she got nothing in return.

She did not receive a blessing from Jesus. She was not healed. Jesus did not say, "Your sins are forgiven, go in peace."

What she got was criticism and consternation from the disciples. The people in the room shout: "How dare she!" "What a waste."

In the Gospel of John, where this story is also found, Judas leads the rejection, "The perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor!"

Funny it was Judas of all people. Judas is the one who was willing to sell out for 30 silver coins – about 120 days' wages or 4 month's worth of salary – whereas this woman blessed Jesus with a gift worth closer to a year's salary.

Yet, Judas did have a point. It was the Passover celebration, a time when traditionally gifts were given to the poor, not to each other.

Yes, she could have loved Jesus by serving the poor.

Many moralists among us would agree – that a year's worth of wages could have done so much good for the needy among us.

After all, didn't Jesus tell us earlier to serve the *least* of these?

But in this moment, Jesus' response is simply "Leave her alone. Why criticize her for doing such a good thing to me?"

This woman knew that there would be other opportunities to give to the poor, but now was her time to give to Jesus.

Without a sound, she cried out in praise. Without a syllable, she spelled out the desire of her heart, to love him. She gave a gift of lavish, excessive, wasteful love.

And then, Jesus continued by saying, she was anointing him for his burial. Which, of course, nobody understood.

Finally, Jesus said something that I never paid attention to before this week. He said:

“She did what she could. And because she did what she could, what she did will be remembered as long as I am remembered.”

And he is right – 2000 years later and we are still talking about this woman and her extravagant gift of love.

“She did what she could” said Jesus.

What if ... what if I did what I could? And you did what you could? And we did what we could?

Right here, right now, wherever God has planted each of us – all of us. What if? What if this was no longer just her story, but it becomes our story?

I want to share a story with you about a young idealistic college student who wanted to share with others his love for God.

Through a parachurch organization, he was assigned to minister in one of the worst-looking housing projects in Philadelphia.

Frightened and anxious to share his new faith, the young man approached a very large, intimidating tenement house.

Cautiously making his way through the dark, cluttered hallways, he walked up a flight of stairs and heard a baby crying. The baby was inside one of the apartments.

So, he knocked on the door and was met by a woman holding a naked baby. She was smoking, and she was not in the mood to hear about Jesus.

She called the boy a few choice words and slammed the door. The young man was devastated.

He walked outside, slumped down on the street curb and cried.

“Look at me,” he said to himself, “How in the world could someone like me think I could tell anyone about my love for God? I can’t do anything right.”

Then the young man looked up and saw a crumbling old store on the corner. It was open, and so he went inside and walked around.

It was then that he remembered that the baby in the apartment was naked and that the woman was smoking.

So, he bought some diapers and a pack of cigarettes and headed back to the woman’s apartment.

He knocked on the door and before the woman could start yelling at him, he slid the cigarettes and diapers inside the open door.

The woman invited him in.

The student played with the baby. He put a diaper on the baby — even though he’d never put a diaper on a baby before.

And when the woman asked him to if he wanted a cigarette, he took one and he smoked it — even though he’d never smoked a cigarette before in his life!

He literally spent the whole day playing with the baby, changing the diapers, and smoking. He did what he could.



Late in the afternoon the woman asked him, "What's a nice college boy like you doing in place like this?"

He told her about his love for God.

When he stopped talking, the woman looked at him and said, "Pray for me and my baby that we make it out of here alive."

He prayed.

This young man's love for God led him to change diapers and to pray for a struggling woman and a crying infant.

This young man did what he could!

So, like this young idealistic college student, like the woman in today's passage, what if I did what I could? What if you did what you could? What if we did what we could?

What if we quit focusing on what we don't have and considered instead what we do have?

What would our spikenard look like?

We might offer a homeless person a Subway gift card.

We might make a casserole for someone who is sick or in need.

We might clean out our closet and give the clothes that we haven't worn in the last year to a homeless organization.

We might buy a new basketball for the teenager in our life.

We might give a living gift and plant a tree in honor of another, maybe in a park or forest, where others can enjoy it, too.

We might send a note of appreciation to a teacher, a friend, a colleague.

We might even enroll in an art class: ceramics, painting, wood carving – for the sole purpose of making a gift for a friend or family member.

The list is endless!

What if ... we did what we could?

This Lenten season, I invite you to share extravagantly your gift of Spikenard, whatever that may look like.

I invite you to do what you can.

*Amen!*