Full to the Brim: Brazen Acts of Beauty

Fifth Sunday in Lent

*John 12:1-8 Rev. Todd B. Freeman*

*College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa April 3, 2022*

In last Sunday’s sermon on the Parable of the Prodigal Son, we learned that the word ‘prodigal’ literally means wastefully or exceedingly extravagant. This term is traditionally tied to the extravagant behavior of the younger son who leaves home to squander his inheritance on reckless living. But we discovered that this term could also be applied to the father who exhibited extravagant prodigal grace in welcoming and accepting his younger son home, and in going out to extend the welcome to his elder son to come in and join the party.

Today’s Gospel reading is another story of **extravagant prodigal behavior**. This time, it’s Mary who pours an extremely large amount of very costly perfume to anoint Jesus’ feet, just days before his entry into Jerusalem where he will soon be crucified. Our Lenten resource for this year, from A Sanctified Art, calls it a brazen act of beauty. It encourages us to both engage in offering to and receiving brazen acts of beauty from others, including God, especially in these troubling times. Hear now **John 12:1-8.**

1Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 3Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. 4But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5‘Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii [that was the equivalent of an entire year’s salary for a day laborer] and the money given to the poor?’ 6(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) 7Jesus said, ‘Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.’

Our Lenten resources connects this passage to the theme of being Full to the Brim through brazen acts of beauty this way:

God is brazen in turning tears into joy. Not so long after their brother Lazarus dies and is raised from the dead, Mary and Martha joyfully welcome Jesus into their home. Mary pours out fragrant perfume (perhaps originally intended to anoint her brother’s body after death) and it fills the whole room. This is a brazen act of beauty. Beauty is resistance to death; beauty is an act of love.

Her anointing of Jesus’ feet is also a public act of worship. Her faith does not hide; it is not frugal. It is embodied, broken open, and poured out. This isn’t a frugal faith—it is an abundant, extravagant faith. [Therefore, I would add, it is a prodigal faith!] Mary’s act is also risky—she puts her full body into it, sort of like a protest. She exhibits a shameless and brazen faith.

And the resource biblical commentator, the Rev. Larissa Kwong Abazia adds:

The story of Mary breaking open a jar of expensive perfume is surrounded by death. Only one chapter earlier, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead at the risk of his own life. Returning to Judea and resurrecting the dead became the final actions necessary for the religious and political leaders to conspire against him. Yet here is this faithful family, welcoming and celebrating Christ as the outside world seeks to write a different story.

As people of faith, we are called to crack ourselves open, pouring out the richness of what is within to more fully worship God. We cannot hide pieces of ourselves or grasp onto expectations that distract from what God created and creates within us. We are free to bring our whole selves as a living testimony to who God has made and makes us to be, both what we label as good and that which we hide from the world…

Remember all of you is beautiful. Live as though you are an expensive gift from God to Creation, because surely you are.

**Worship as a brazen act of beauty**. I’ve never really thought about it like that before. So, it’s something for us to ponder and reflect upon.

**What else might we consider as brazen acts of beauty.** What about beauty as any act of love and kindness and compassion? What about beauty as resistance to the status quo, where others are lifted up to a more abundant life? Over the past two years, our Adult Church School Class gatherings, as inspiringly led by John Gammie, often had us explore the role of recognizing and sharing the beauty that is always in our midst, and especially when so much seems negative and ugly, as much has over the past two years. What beauty can you recognize and share today, everyday?

Mary’s actions have been defined and interpreted as wasteful, shameful, inappropriate, even sensual, as did Judas and some biblical interpreters over the ages. Instead, **Jesus affirms and praises what she does because it is an act of love**. This act also foreshadows and mirrors what will happen the very next week after Jesus enters Jerusalem and later shares a last meal with his disciples. Jesus, in a brazen act of beauty, washes their feet as an act of love and then commands them to do the same for one another. I love the fact that Mary beats the guys to the punch! She is very much a model of faithful discipleship.

Here are a few more questions to ponder. When and how have you shared in, witnessed, or received an act of love, a brazen act of beauty, that could be dismissed as excessive or inappropriate? **How are you feel being called right now to engage in a brazen act of beauty toward another**?

In addition to the word brazen, I think we could also call them **prodigal acts of beauty**. That can remind us to also see and relate the beauty that always surrounds us, as well as specific acts of beauty, as **elements of the prodigal grace of God**. God spares nothing in loving us and asks us to spare nothing in loving each other. Jesus himself accepts and appreciates Mary’s action of care and compassion. The act exceeds words, as good rituals do.

Biblical commentator Stephanie Perdew, posting this week on *The Christian Century* website writes,

When God gives, there is never a waste. So as the gospel teaches: break open the good wine tonight. Have a pop-up dinner party. Invite a hurting friend. Touch the friend who is ill or afraid. Cradle the child. Spare no expense on the healing balm. **Don’t waste one drop or one moment. Jesus celebrates Mary’s lavish rite of spontaneous love. Together they invite us to celebrate our rites of spontaneous love right now.**

And remember, love also means receiving. I’ve often said to others, and myself, when finding it hard to accept a gift, or even a compliment, to “**Receive the blessing**.” A simple “thank you very much,” is most often the best response. **Receive with humility what others have to offer**. That might even be a crayon drawing to put on the fridge. The sound of young children here in the sanctuary during worship. Or, a colored poster from the children of the church wishing the pastor a Happy Anniversary.

**Brazen acts of beauty. They’re all around us.** What a wonderful and timely message as next week we enter into both the joy and tragedy of Holy Week, followed by the brazen act of beauty found in the story of Jesus’ resurrection. Look for, commit yourself to brazen acts of beauty!

Amen.

Resources:

A Sanctified Art, “The Third Sunday in Lent – Full to the Brim: You Are Worthy”, 2022.

Stephanie Perdew, “A rite of spontaneous love” *The Christian Century*, posted from newsletter@christiancentury.org, 3-28-22