

HAIL MARY, FULL OF GRACE!

John 12:1-8
March 25, 2007, Lent V
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What does extravagant love look like? And is there really any other kind of love?

For me, extravagant love looked like my grandmother. She and I had a special bond. And I was often the recipient of her extravagant love. A few weeks ago, I told you about how this love exhibited itself in her cooking, especially in her fried chicken. But food was only one of many “love avenues” in her life. My grandmother was also extravagant with her spending, much to the chagrin of my grandfather. But for her, money was nothing if not a means to show how much she cared. And so, she was extravagant with her gifts. She would buy shoes for poor preachers she barely knew, because the Bible says: “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of them that bring good news.” She would slip money into the hands of widows at her church. She loved stylish clothes and was always buying me something. Once she gave me a hot pink and lime green psychedelic scarf that fastened around the neck with a ring (it was the ‘70s!). My grandmother took me on secret trips to the amusement park, provided funds for me to be a high school exchange student to Spain, bought my college ring, gave me my second car. When I was younger, I thought this extravagance was evidence that my grandmother’s life was a party, defined only by the good times. It wasn’t until I was an adult and could see my grandmother through adult eyes that I understood that the genesis of her love had nothing to do

with times being good. In fact, she often loved in the midst of some very dark times, exactly when extravagant love is needed most.

Is this what extravagant love looks like? And is there really any other kind of love?

In the past few months, I have been trying to help someone incarcerated on Riker's Island, awaiting trial. It's worse than you've been led to believe. And the abusive treatment isn't just for the prisoners. As the bus passes over the bridge onto the island, it became quite clear to me that visitors are treated as guilty by association. This is not just the case at Riker's, but seems endemic to the entire New York City penal system. Last week, I went downtown to put some money on his commissary account, so that he can buy stamps and deodorant and a clean t-shirt. In a tiny, filthy room, you can wait for many hours to pay bail or commissary. There is one tiny wooden bench that can hold two or three of the 30 people crammed into the space. There is no bathroom, no water fountain and certainly no respect. I saw old women on canes and young women with strollers standing under the same harsh fluorescent glare... being treated shamefully in a place appropriately called "The Tombs."

As I waited in the line that snaked out the door into the cold, I started talking to the old man behind me. He told me of his son who had often been in trouble. And then he said: "You know, when my son does time, so do I. I have to come to places like this and suffer humiliation to try to make his life a little easier. But what else am I going to do? I love my son."

Is this what extravagant love looks like? And is there really any other kind of love?

Today's Gospel lesson is about extravagant love, set literally in the midst of death – between the tomb of Jesus and the tomb of Lazarus. Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary were among Jesus' closest friends. One day, Lazarus got sick, and Jesus was summoned to come to Bethany where they lived. But he was delayed, and by the time he got there, Lazarus was already dead, for four days, and his sisters, Martha and Mary, were overcome with grief and frustration. "If only you had been here," they said. And then, in perhaps one of the most touching scenes recorded in the New Testament, Jesus did that most human thing: Jesus wept. And then, Jesus did that most divine thing: looking death square in the face, he called Lazarus forth from his tomb, and gave him back to his grateful sisters, alive.

This is the set up for what David read for us today. Jesus, as the guest of honor, had been invited, along with a number of other people, to dinner at his friends' house. And there at the head of the table was Lazarus, regaling the guests with stories of the blinding light that awakened him from death. I imagine that in the years to come, his sisters would gently roll their eyes when he started his tale. On this day, the story was fresh and wondrous. His sister Martha was busily serving the meal. But Mary was strangely absent. Suddenly, she entered the room carrying a jar of nard, a very expensive perfume, known for its abilities to refresh and exhilarate. I expect the room got quiet and all eyes turned to her. And what happened next was nothing short of a scandal. Kneeling down in front of Jesus, Mary poured the perfume on his

feet, and then wiped them with her hair. And that display of extravagant love broke all the rules of a highly patriarchal society. You see, Mary entered a room full of men, without the intention of serving them their dinner. And then she knelt before a man who was not her husband, and poured perfume on his naked feet. She touched his feet with her hands. And then, in an act that would taint her reputation, she let down her hair, a sign of intimacy usually reserved only for one's husband. Make no mistake. This was not the behavior of a traditional woman. The scandalized dinner guests began to whisper about her impropriety. Judas, the treasurer of the disciples, and a thief, spoke up: "What a waste! This perfume is worth a year's wages and it could have been sold and the money given to the poor." He had a point. After all, Jesus' ministry had largely been to the poor. I suppose the other guests expected Jesus to agree. But he did not. He saw something beyond an inappropriate act. He saw the purity of her extravagant love and he defended her gift. He even went on to say that she was anointing him for his burial. But she was doing even more than that. Mary, by loving extravagantly and pouring out all she had, was a foretaste, a picture, an incarnation of the love God has for the world; a love that in few days, would be shown on a cross. Mary humbled herself. Mary poured out the best she had, and in that moment she was filled with God.

Last week in the Lenten Bible study, we had an interesting discussion about the patriarchal nature of Christianity. There is just no denying that for most of the church's history, men have controlled things. And the Bible has been used to support this male dominated power structure. After all, the twelve disciples were men, people say. Jesus called God "Our Father", people say. And this is true, but it

is not the whole truth. Statements like this demonstrate a reading of the Bible that is selective in nature. Thinking like this does not pay attention to the subtleties or nuance of language. It cares little for the discoveries scholars have made about the place of women in the earliest churches. And it does not pay sufficient attention to stories like this one, in which, a woman who loved extravagantly, who disregarded the rules that got in the way of love, became a picture of the sacrificial love of God in Jesus Christ.

Jesus was deeply moved by Mary's love. Some have even argued that Mary's act was an inspiration to Jesus, who remembered her devotion when he washed the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper. I don't know if that is the case, but I think it is quite possible that her act of love was never far from his mind in the days before his own death.

It is not my point today to somehow elevate Mary to the place of Jesus, or to present a politically correct female equivalent to the person of Jesus. But it is my point to say that we need to pay attention to her and to what she did, because it is profound. And it is an inspiration for any of us who long to be incarnations of the love of God in a world of division and hatred.

Mary chose sacrificial love over everything else, and when she did, she was full of grace. She gave flesh to the love of God. She was a picture of our Creator's extravagant love for this world. And so today, I honor her. I say, Hail Mary, full of grace! But this salutation does not belong to her alone. It can be said of any of us

who, like Jesus, who like Mary, choose sacrificial love over narrow self-interest; who pour ourselves out, despite the ridicule of society, and thus become a mirror of the divine. And so I also say, hail Connie, full of grace. Hail David, full of grace. Hail Ida, full of grace... And all to the praise and glory of the One whose extravagant love would take him all the way to the cross.