

John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary 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. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' (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.) Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

### **The Heart of Worship**

Those of you who came to the 60s night last night: I am so amazed to see you here this morning...and I know some of you are amazed to see me. But you shouldn't be: I'm paid to be here; you're not. You could be in bed California Dreamin' of Crimson and Clover or Sweet Caroline (good times never felt so good...). But you are HERE, and I'm hoping it's not because you feel guilty about the good time you had last night...because if anyone should feel guilty it should be me, for singing "Wild Thing" or "Under My Thumb."

But the truth is that I don't, and neither should anyone, because last night was a celebration, and when you think about it, **worship is also a celebration...**or at least it should be. Here we are getting close to the end of Lent, a time when people often "give up" something that brings them pleasure...like candy or beer or ice cream, and I don't disparage or discourage anyone from giving up something **so long as they give it up for the right reason.** And the right reason should be to help us focus on Jesus, not to give up something we like in order to be miserable. God does not want us to be masochists, **but he does want us to draw near to him and draw near to one another. I felt the joy of fellowship last night as I felt drawn closer to others, and I could see others**

***drawing closer to one another, and when we draw closer to one another we can't help but draw closer to God whose greatest desire is for us to live joyfully in perfect fellowship with him and with each other. And we don't have to sing hymns for that to happen; we can sing songs and play songs that appeal to a wider audience, and so we can bring more people into joyful fellowship.***

When I was about 24 years old, in 1984, I lived with two friends who were the same age as me – I had graduated but they were still in college – one had started late and the other had taken some time off before resuming his studies. Both were art students, and what was really wonderful was that we lived in this 4 apartment complex in this historic old district of Richmond, Virginia called “The Fan” where nearly everyone was either a college student or a recent graduate, and our 4 apartment complex was right next to a university building (the dance department) and there was a large parking lot in our backyard. In our 4 apartment complex there were about 9 of us – boys and girls (we were young back then, so I considered us boys and girls). And we all got along great; we usually left our doors open and would visit each other at random, and we all had friends outside of little 4 apartment complex who would come and spend time in our little paradise. None of us went to church that I know of, but our relationships were really marked by love and care and fun and laughter.

And somehow...I don't know exactly...someone came up with the idea of having a party during the summer in our perfect environment. All nine of us who lived in our four-apartment complex loved the idea. We pooled resources, and we decided that this was going to be an open party; anyone who showed up was welcome – sure, we were taking a risk but we were stupid and we were pretty confident that we all had the people skills to deal with any problems that may arise. And so we started planning it – 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend pig roast, and yes we had kegs, and we had a good sound system which was aimed at the huge parking lot behind our apartments and we put together music and we got kegs and got the word out...and everything went off without a hitch: the party started around noon on a Saturday and didn't end until the middle of the night – I have

no idea when. Yeah, there was a big mess to clean up the next day, but we all pitched in as did a lot of the folks who ended up spending the night, and by Sunday night I was ready to go back to work on Monday. **The party was legendary** meaning people were talking about it for years, and usually with big smiles on their faces. It was beyond fun, and it created bonds between people that would never be broken.

When we read about Jesus, we see that a lot of people hung out with him, and when he went to someone's house, a lot of people went with him. And I imagine that he was the kind of people that gave open invitations for people to come see him wherever he may have been. And while Jesus was the main attraction, I'm sure that if there was a band or a sound system there would have been tunes and dancing whenever he finished his preaching. And there would have been people coming together with joy and a sense of community like what was felt at our little 4-apartment complex open party.

Well that is what worship should be. At the heart of worship is joy and community and friendship and celebration...and a little bit of risk because the church shouldn't close its doors on anyone. But imagine if someone came into our worship space and started complaining: "How can you spend so much money on the pastor when there are so many poorer people out there? How can you spend so much on the keyboardist and choir director? Don't you know that there are people starving out there? And you should just send people home after the worship service; spending money on coffee and cakes is just a waste when some folks go to bed without food.

All of these are valid points: there are poor and hungry people out there who we could feed with our resources. Judas had a point when he criticized Mary for using a lot of expensive perfume to anoint Jesus' feet. But is it wrong to honor someone? Is it wrong to spend our money in ways that bring joy to people we love, even though the people we love have enough to eat and not everyone does? Of course it's not! In her extravagant expression of love, Mary is worshiping Jesus, just as we are this morning, in a beautiful

sanctuary with beautiful music and good snacks we can eat while we **continue** to honor Jesus as we fellowship after the service. It is no sin to love someone and to express that love in extravagant ways. That's what Mary is doing in today's Gospel lesson. That's what we are doing this morning. And, assuming our hearts and minds were focused on bringing joy to people we love, **that's what we were doing last night.**

Now when Jesus says, "the poor will always be with us" he is not dismissing them as irrelevant; Jesus speaks a lot about our need to care for those who have real needs. **But he doesn't discourage us from expressing love and thanksgiving in extravagant ways to the people we are close to.** And we should not refrain from doing so. And if someone who is hungry walks into our church we're not going to ignore their needs, but we can feel comfortable worshiping God, loving God as we love others, right here amongst ourselves, and no one should spoil our celebration.