

The Extravagant Tenderness of God
Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 26, 2023, 10:00 a.m.
All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Dr. Sally Howard

Good morning All Saints!

On this fifth Sunday of Lent, we pause, as Jesus did before entering Jerusalem, to be touched by a story of extravagant tenderness and love. As I was writing this sermon, I was reminded of one of my best friends of all time. I met Bryan during graduate school. After becoming ordained, his was the first wedding I at which I officiated, marrying him and his partner of 25 years. Bryan is the most excellent gift giver! He rummages through second hand stores and E-bay niches to find treasures for the people he loves. He has found beautiful earrings for my daughters, works by a Los Angeles artist that I love, and unearthed dishes made in Denmark by my husband's great-grandfather.

There are more holidays and birthdays than I can count, when we have been showered with his love, gift after gift. Each one says, 'I am thinking about you, I know who you are, and I want you to know what a treasure you are to me.' His extravagant tenderness and generosity, reflected in year-long collecting and curating always touches me deeply and makes me smile with that wonderful feeling that I am known and treasured.

Our gospel story today is about extravagant love and the tenderness. In the story, a woman anoints Jesus' head with very costly perfumed oil, a gesture that disturbs and angers some of Jesus disciples. He tells them to leave her alone and he makes a confusing statement that seems to contradict all his teaching about caring for the poor.

What can we learn from this story, and what can we carry with us, as we move into the bleak events of Palm Sunday and the days to follow?

In this gospel story, Jesus is making his way to Jerusalem for Passover, where he knows he will meet violence and death. Passover was and is a freedom narrative, one that openly expressed subversive native traditions in the midst of a dominating public transcript of expected submission. The ruling power was Rome, and while Rome had authorized Passover gatherings, its celebration remained dangerous for the elite class whose power depended on Rome's approval of their control of the people. The ruling elite had already decided to kill Jesus threatened by his prophetic voice, and as importantly, by his popularity. They could neither control him nor could they contain the draw of his compassionate presence.

On the opposite side of the city from where Jesus will enter on a young donkey, Roman troops were poised to enter Jerusalem with full display of military power. Theirs was a practice of terror intended to repress any insurrectionary movements. His was a planned counter-march.

With confrontation and his own death before him, Jesus paused in Bethany to have dinner with Simon, a man with leprosy. This was not Jesus' first dinner or proximity to those people his

culture deemed untouchable. Jesus was always gathering people around tables where he paid no mind to purity codes or false measures of worth! As they were eating, the woman described in the story, entered this predominantly male space, and countervailed the honor and decency code they had established. She decisively anointed the male body of Jesus, breaking the boundaries of a male gathering, and declaring Jesus' the anti-imperialist Messiah and King. She just broke rules right and left. By anointing Jesus, this woman performed the commonly male role of prophet. It was not only subversive culturally, but also treasonous to Rome. She anointed Jesus as the people's king, ignoring sanctions by men or the rulers of Rome. Her act of defiance against the Roman emperor encouraged and comforted Jesus.

In that moment, Jesus is being loved with a grace upon grace kind of love, that you could even smell, with a fragrance that would linger for days — I wonder if Jesus remembered his mother. Three years before, in Cana, at that wedding, his mother knew who he was and what he was capable of doing. His loving mother, actually started his ministry.

Now, in Bethany, Jesus finds himself in a similar kind of position, the same kind of transaction. Unlike his followers, this woman understands that Jesus will soon die. She recognizes that Jesus needs that same encouragement, that compassionate love, to do what he must do. Her extravagant love for Jesus makes it possible for Jesus to show extravagant love during what follows — washing the feet of his disciples, handing himself over to be arrested in the garden, carrying his own cross, dying, rising, and ascending. This woman loves Jesus into his future. The sign she performs signifies the in-breaking of God's new world of mutual transformation and healing. It is an infinite and essential moment where everything happens.

How do you imagine that this woman came to such fullness of dignity, and awareness of her true purpose?

How did she have the courage to interrupt the oppressive systems around her?

Where did she get the strength for such a decisive and extravagant outpouring of tenderness and devotion?

I think you know the answer. Jesus had seen her with God's eyes and he loved her as Jesus himself was extravagantly loved by God, with grace upon grace, gift upon gift, he was infinitely treasured every moment of every day and night of his life.

To follow Jesus is to change our understanding of God. God is never toxic, never dominating. God is not rigid, cruel, vengeful, or transactional "I love you, now you love me." Unlike some of our human parents, God isn't embarrassed by us or disappointed in us. God is not a god of requirements nor a blinding interrogation lamp. This is a version of God limited by our projections; a tiny flawed god made in our own image. When God is cast as this kind of male, it fuels the kind of unhealthy and unholy definitions of masculinity seen in Christian Nationalism today.

Jesus, always an example of the godliness of tenderness, came into the world as a vulnerable baby. His first lesson was of tenderness, not imperial power. Tenderness is often maligned as too soft, and throughout the ages as an intrinsically female characteristic. Fortunately, we are

evolving to less binary definitions.

The tender behavior of all of our siblings is apparent in our congregation, and we will continue our walk towards freedom-- our own exodus from the destructive binaries that bind us all.

God doesn't require anything of us except to receive God's love that will change everything. God's love thaws the holy in us. It shifts the energy field from scarcity to abundance. Tehila in Hebrew means to radiate God's tenderness. That's what births devotion. That's what heals. That's the force that breaks the cage.

Miribai Starr wrote, "Once you know the God of love, you fire all the other gods."

Jesus' statement that "the poor will always be with you" has been understood by some as Jesus prioritizing worship over justice. Jesus did not teach this polarized binary thinking. He was a Jewish mystic. He saw the connection of all things, and refused to be seduced by false divisions. In this loving interaction, in the presence of his followers, Jesus called attention to the source of our pouring generosity and compassion that cares for the most vulnerable. Jesus recognized his own vulnerability and welcomed his human need to be held in compassion and recognition for his true self. All human beings need this. The Incarnation didn't happen because of sin, but because God's love needed to become tenderness in the flesh.

Oddly, some folks don't see the sanity in tenderness. Instead, they see it as sappy.

Don't mistake tenderness with being nice. Tenderness is radicalized nice.

Like Jesus and the woman in the gospel story, we *decide* to be tender. It requires courage and tenacity. We use the most powerful ability that human beings have— our intention to allow our tougher, protected selves to become supple.

Disdain for tenderness towards others always comes from a place of judgment and disdain within. The revolutionary Jesus modeled for us gender non-conforming behavior, and an embrace of his own human vulnerability and need for tenderness.

This unnamed woman followed in kind, undergirding his final walk to Jerusalem, where he will face the ultimate human vulnerability of death.

In recognizing and receiving love, Jesus disrupted patriarchy and the notion that God is invulnerable to our longings, and distant from us. The truth is that God bares Her heart to us. She is the Mother of orphans and defender of widows. She is the Good Shepherd who gathers the lambs in her arms, and carries them in her bosom, gently leading as the mother sheep. Exalt She who rides upon the clouds, the Author of life who gives the word! In Her have all creatures found their dwelling.

Rooted in Hebrew scriptures, and present in the early church, the texts for today, powerfully translated by our scholar in residence, Dr. Wil Gaffney, all point to an understanding of women as bearers, proclaimers, and preachers of good news. The woman who anoints Jesus stands with all of these women, and more. Despite the fact that Jesus says what she has done will be told in memory of her whenever the good news is proclaimed, the framers of the text did not

preserve her name. This action marginalized her, pointing to the tomb where women's names and voices are buried, never to arise again. She persisted, and we will persist until every child of God is treated with honor and dignity.

St. Ignatius said that devotion is ease in finding God. Indeed, grand is the smile of God. Praying is breathing in our God of unfathomable extravagant compassion and it fuels our own compassion and passion for justice in our community and our world. We love because we are first loved.

Compassionate God, open our hearts that we know what we most deeply desire, and fill us with your longing for us, and your tenderness towards us, so that we may radiate that love to everyone around us, grace upon grace upon unending grace.

Amen

This sermon is indebted to and borrows some phrases from Father Greg Boyle's book, *The Whole Language: The Extravagant Tenderness of God*.