

“Stewardship of All”
Matthew 26:6-12

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October 28, 2007

Something beautiful, something good, sometimes I need a dose of that. How about you? All the great philosophers of history describe truth, goodness, and beauty as supreme values. Christopher Morley once said, “In every man’s heart, there is a secret nerve that answers to the vibrations of beauty.” So, today I want to tell you a beautiful story. It’s in the Bible. To preach it would be to abuse it. So let me simply tell it as well as I can.

A BEAUTIFUL ACT

“Now while Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table” (Matthew 26:6).

At Bethany, a little village, about 2 miles out of Jerusalem, on the Road to Jericho, at the house of Simon the Leper; thousands of Simons lived in Jerusalem, like thousands of Jims live in Brentwood. The Bible is full of them; Simon the Sorcerer, Simon the Zealot, Simon of Cyrene, and Simon Peter. This Simon is Simon the Leper. The man who has “unclean” still ringing in his ears. The man, who knows what it is to be shunned and what it is to be healed, invites Jesus to dinner.

A woman came to him. Which woman? What woman? Matthew doesn’t bother to name her, except to say that she has an alabaster jar of very costly ointment—not cheap stuff made of olive oil, but the expensive stuff, pure nard, imported from India, handed down from generation to generation, worth more than a whole years wages. She poured it on the head of Jesus as he sat at the table. A beautiful act, a loving deed, an extravagant expression of love and devotion.

Love knows no limits. Love counts no cost. Love calculates no deal. Love never asks how much. Love gives. *“She broke it open and poured it all on his head.”*

That word all, bothers me. When I sing: “All to Jesus I surrender; All to him I freely give,” I begin to wonder “How much is all?” Yet, how can I make a lesser sacrifice when Jesus gave his all?

One Friday night some months ago, while wrestling with some difficult medical news, I walked into our family room, following a wedding rehearsal, only to find our two sons sitting there. For those who don’t know, one of our sons lives in Louisville, the other in Ft. Myers, Florida. At first, I was shocked and a bit suspicious. “Who called this meeting?” I asked, “It’s too early to collect your inheritance.” Then Wes, who is never

short for words, said: “Relax Dad. We have no agenda. When we’ve been in trouble, you and Mom have always come. That’s what our family does. So, we just came to be with you.” That weekend our sons gave us the beautiful gift of their personal presence. Something beautiful, something good, all our confusion, they understood. Sometimes you just long for the good and the beautiful.

A NEGATIVE REACTION

“But when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, “Why this waste? For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum and the money given to the poor”
(Matthew 26: 8).

When the disciples saw it, the called ones, the in-crowd, the friends of Jesus, the blessed ones, the leaders of the Christian movement; they were angry, upset, put out, indignant, snarling. “Why this waste?” “What about the poor?”

While I neither consider myself an architect nor a builder, it has been my lot over these forty years of ministry to lead four major building programs at the churches I served as well as develop a major Retreat Center and Retirement Community for the Kentucky Annual Conference. Fundamentally, I prefer preaching to building plans and hospital calling to hoisting beams, nevertheless, building has been a major part of my ministry.

I have yet to restore a sanctuary, build an education wing, develop a retreat center or conceive a state of the art retirement community without someone standing up in a board meeting, making a speech on a conference floor, or sending me a critical e-mail saying, “What a waste, this money could be better spent.”

I was not here when our present Sanctuary was constructed, but I know what some of you call it: The Methodome, the Taj Mahal, Six Flags over Jesus. Let me tell you what I call all that we have on this campus, “A beautiful gift to God who always deserves our best!”

Deborah Douglas in the journal, Weavings, writes about the church of her childhood. Constructed in the sixties, it was a severely simple, self-conscious product of modernism. Its barren surroundings allowed nothing to distract from the sermon—no candles, no flowers, no loving shepherd tending his sheep. The only exception was thick, colored-glass windows designed to prevent worshipers from gazing off at the beauty of the Earth during the service. But God does have a sense of humor. “At certain times of the morning, sometimes right during the sermon, a stream of sunlight would burst through those colored-glass windows, and cast upon our gathering a gentle glow of the Holy Spirit.” God does have his way of letting beauty shine through.

A LASTING MEMORY

“But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, “Why do you trouble this woman? She has

performed a good service for me” (Matthew 26:10).

She discovered the value of the urgent and the important. Life is full of stuff that claims our time. So we must learn to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.

Some things calling for our attention are neither urgent nor important. They are just time consuming. A lot of our doing has little impact on our being. We are just doing things to be doing, to keep busy.

Some things calling for our attention are urgent, but not important. Many phone calls and e-mails, even the ones with the red exclamation point are urgent, but often not very important.

Some things are important, but not very urgent. *“For you always have the poor with you” (Matthew 26:11).* Never read this as a statement of unconcern for the poor. Jesus never intended it that way. Every poor person however, is not an emergency, and wise are those who know how to triage that.

Some things are urgent and important. *“But you will not always have me.”* There are opportunities that lie before us this autumn day that will vanish by spring. Autumn is beautiful, but autumn is brief. Smart people know what time it is.

The fragrance of a deed well done lasts forever.

“Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her” (Matthew 26:13).

The end of Jesus’ life rocks with so much bitterness, treachery, tragedy, blood, sweat, and tears, is it any wonder that this little story shines like an oasis of light in a dark and dreary world?

The human soul is still hungry for beauty. We seek it everywhere. In creation, in cosmetics, in clothes and companionship, maybe we need to look deeper. Maybe we need to search our souls.

The Greek word for beauty is kalon. It contains the notion of a “calling.” Are you called:

To be broken and spilled out till fragrance fills the room?

To do something beautiful with no concern of whom might be critical, or call you a fool?

Will you pour it all out for the beautiful, the good, the true?