

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
Colorado Springs, Colorado  
October 21, 2012  
©2012

## A Season of Stewardship: "Take My Life & Let Be..." III. "My Love I Pour..."

Mark 14:3-9 While [Jesus] was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. 4 But some were there who said to one another in anger, "Why was the ointment wasted in this way? 5 For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor." And they scolded her. 6 But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. 7 For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. 8 She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. 9 Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

2 Corinthians 9:6-11a The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. 7 Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 8 And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. 9 As it is written, "He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever." 10 He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. 11 You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity....

This story of Jesus and the woman with the ointment – perfume, really, is what it was – is one of those stories in the gospels that make us uncomfortable, doesn't it? We don't know quite what to do, how to respond, to the woman's actions. The woman is called Mary in John's gospel – where she doesn't pour the perfume on his head, but rather on his feet – and John also identifies her as the sister of Martha, and both are sisters of Lazarus, the man who is described as Jesus' very close friend, the one he wept over at the news of his death. My wife Barbara once preached a sermon on this story and still remember the wisdom with which she interpreted this story; hear her words;

"Mary brings a gift to Jesus. It's not the kind of gift that any of us here would

likely bring to Christ. To us it's a strange kind of expression of love: pouring out a whole bottle full of the most expensive perfumed oil she could get her hands on, pouring it all out on Jesus' hair, according to Mark, or on his feet, according to [John], and then drying his feet with her hair! I mean, to us, either way, that is just weird, isn't it? ... To the disciples who were there, it was quite strange. They saw it. They smelled it. They didn't get it. It wasn't useful. It wasn't practical.... None of them would have given such a gift as this. None of us would likely give this particular gift to Christ or his church.

And then Barbara continues:

But she would... And she did. And see what Jesus does. Can you see him in that room, the strong smell of perfume and embarrassment in the air? Watch him. Look at his feet. He doesn't move them. She pours out this whole bottle. And it takes a while. It's a big bottle.... strong and... exotic and she pours out every last drop. And he stays still for her. He stays still for her as she then takes his feet in her hands and dries them with her hair!

Let me ask you a question: If someone tried to do any of that to you, could you keep your feet still? I couldn't. I don't know about you but I'd suddenly find an urgent errand I needed to do before she could get that bottle un-stoppered! But not Jesus. Jesus doesn't even move.... And when someone in the room criticizes her gift, he says, *'Leave her alone. She has done what she could.'* He defends her gift and he receives her love exactly as it is.<sup>1</sup>

Most of you no doubt know the line in the Christmas carol "O Little Town of Bethlehem" that goes like this: *"The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."* You know what? That line – "hopes and fears" – is actually also a very good

---

<sup>1</sup>Barbara Blaisdell, "The Power & Purpose of Worship: Your Promise & Purpose Under God," **United Community Church, Hilo, Hawaii, 2/15/09.**

line to describe the occasion of **any** gift-giving. To give a gift is to be caught up in a moment of both hope and fear. It certainly is a line that could describe the gift that Mary gave to Jesus when she poured that costly perfumed ointment on his feet. Hope and fear. She hoped that Jesus would understand, appreciate, be grateful for her gift. She hoped that it would truly and perfectly symbolize what He meant to her, how his teachings had changed her life, how his special friendship with her brother and her family had meant so much to them, how his willingness to treat her and other women -- unlike so much of the culture around him -- as just as worthy of being his followers as men was such a wonderfully liberating thing. So many hopes focused on that jar of perfumed ointment, so many hopes enacted in the washing of Jesus' feet. But also fear: she feared that he would laugh at her. She feared that His reaction would be the reaction of those others who were there and who complained about the cost, complained, it almost sounds like, about the personal and almost intimate nature of this action. She feared that Jesus might be embarrassed by her dramatic gesture. She feared that she would be misunderstood and that what would be seen in her actions would not be the same at all as what she had intended. Hope and fear indeed, all mingled together.

But co-mingling of hope and fear is, I would suggest, the same on any occasion of gift giving. We hope that what we have chosen will be appropriate. We hope that our giftee won't open our present and think "What an incredibly hideous thing. I wonder which rummage sale I can give it to where the giver won't likely see it?" We hope that our intentions in giving the gift will not be seen as somehow having some hidden agenda that we can't even imagine but can nonetheless make ourselves sick worrying about. And our hopes don't even have to be so freighted, so intense: we can hope that what we bought is the right size (I had an aunt once who seemed strangely unfamiliar with the normal sizes of children and her gifts of improbably colored sweaters were

always either perfect for someone the size of a G.I. Joe doll or the Incredible Hulk. We never knew which it would be). We hope that we got the date of the birthday right. We hope our spouse didn't notice that her birthday gift was actually a week late (although that is a hope, I have to tell you, that is doomed)

And we fear too: We fear that our recipient will hate our gift. We fear that it will be seen as too personal, or not personal enough. We fear that our recipient will mentally compare it to what he or she has given us and that we will be found wanting in the equation. Or, again, maybe our fears are just more mundane ones, but still there: we fear that our giftee already has one, or really doesn't want this sort of thing anymore. When she was young, my mother once expressed a fondness for owl figurines. Thirty years later she once quietly told me – having been inundated with owls for that previous thirty years – “I really didn't like owls THAT much.”

Truly hope and fear are met in the act of giving. And there is actually a very simple reason for that. In Barbara's words again: “Every gift we give is a symbol of our love. My gift is a symbol of my love in this relationship. It is a symbol of my inner-most self, my heart, my soul wrapped up in paper and ribbon and held in your hands.”<sup>2</sup> Doesn't that just capture it perfectly? We have been made by God as creatures who want and need to love, and therefore want and need to give, but in that giving, in that love, we always feel vulnerable. We are always keenly aware of our hopes and our fears. It is why, I am convinced, there are people we all have known who have become cheerless grumpy givers – because their fears finally overwhelmed them and their giving is now less an expression of joy and hope than it is simply dutiful drudgery. But, at the same time, we have all known other folks who the older they get the more joy they take in giving; these are the ones who have not let their fears control them but instead have let the hope inherent in gift giving animated them – even as they know that

---

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

occasionally a gift won't be right, or won't be received in the spirit given. That does not daunt them.

A few years ago, Barbara was making a pot of coffee one morning. Now, this particular coffee maker was very slow and sclerotic, taking it's own sweet time to fill the pot. And the pot itself wasn't designed very well. When you poured a cup, you had to be very careful that it didn't drip and slosh everywhere but the cup you were aiming at. Anyway, Barbara was making coffee and she really needed it And finally it was done. And she grabbed the pot and began pouring a cup – and she poured too fast and as much coffee went on the counter as in the cup. And I said, in that smug and supercilious voice that is not my best thing, “If you poured it more slowly, it wouldn't make a mess.” And she stamped her foot and said “Life's too short to pour slow!”

And it is, isn't it? Life is too full of opportunity to give with abandon to ever find ourselves too timid. The need is too great in this wonderful world for us to get immobilized by our fears our let our hopes be hobbled by our anxiety. Like Mary, pouring out that perfume extravagantly and abundantly, we too are called to pour with abandon, to pour with hope, to acknowledge our fears but never ever let them master us. So, let us ask: what does all of that mean on this morning when we have our opportunity to make our financial commitments to this church's ministry in 2013? Well, St. Paul had a word for it that I think incorporates all that I have been saying. Did you hear him? Paul said we are to give cheerfully. Why? Because of God's own excellent, audacious, extravagant, joyful giving to us and this world. Because God Himself didn't and doesn't “pour slow” but blesses each of us beyond the telling of it. Did you hear how Paul went on, though? These are words that I think are key to who we are and what we can do on this occasion when our economic worries can seem too much, when the fear tempts us to hoard and turn inward, when the anxiety about whether there will

be enough tempts us to run the other direction and become miserly. I know those fears and worries and I know that you do too. But in the face of such fear, Paul says this: “God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.” And, my friends, it is true: we have been provided in abundance. And we can yet share in abundance. Even the poorest of us is richer in material blessings than 95% of the world. Even the most anxious among us has been shaped and held and loved and formed by the love of good folks, in good times and bad. How can we not want to give – giving with exuberance, pouring with joy! – in order to share that experience, in order that we might continue to have a spirit-filled, mission-driven, love-celebrating, cheerful congregation that continues to want to reach out to those who don’t know these things and so need to know them? I am convinced that God will continue to work to bless us as we continue to seek to bless others through our giving. I will be glad therefore, even in the midst of anxiety, even as both hope and fear meet, to increase my own pledge for this coming year. I don’t want to “pour slow” and I hope you don’t either. I know that each of you has been praying about how you might respond to this opportunity. But whatever you decide you want to do, whatever God is calling you to give of time, talent, and treasure, know this: God wants you to take joy in that giving. It is not simply an obligation but an enormous and wondrous opportunity. Your commitment form this morning is the sign and symbol of your belief that indeed it will be hope and not fear that can and does and will always win out in this place where God has yet so much ministry for us to do. May it be so on this morning that our commitment forms will indeed be the sign of the love we pour, love that is poured never slowly or stingily, but exuberantly and enthusiastically and cheerfully. Shall we sing about it? “Take My Life and Let It Be,” hymn # 609, verses 5 and 6.