

A Different Calculation
John 12:1-8
April 7, 2019
First Presbyterian, Luling

When I was an associate pastor at a medium sized church in San Antonio, we had lots of mission projects and activities. One of them, which is a common idea, is to adopt families for Christmas. The idea was that we would get names and ages and wish lists for family members. Usually, we'd hang this information on a tree, one card per family or per individual. A church member would choose a card, shop for an item for the individual or family, wrap it, and return it to the church. A helpful mission committee member would then ferry the items over to our partner organization, who had made sure the families were qualified. The good part about this project was that it involved lots of people in the congregation, and we felt like we were doing a little something good for a group of families in our city.

Then one year, Ken threw the whole thing into question. Ken was one of our elders, on the Session. He may have even been leading the Mission Committee that year; I can't remember, but I bet he was. He was really good at asking questions that made you think. I ran into him last summer at camp, and he's still gifted at asking tough but good questions. He asked the Mission committee, and then the Session, "what if, instead of giving a whole bunch of families a single gift each, what if we just chose one family and showered them with gifts for everyone, multiple gifts for everyone, practical gifts and not-practical gifts, things for the family to use and enjoy together. Then they would get a sense of the abundant grace of God, not as if it's a scarce resource to be portioned out carefully, but as it is: a generous and gracious outpouring of goodness?"

Well. You see what I mean about Ken asking good questions. This idea had never ever occurred to me before. I had always thought it was a good idea to cover as many people as possible, to make sure that as many families as possible received Christmas gifts. It had never ever dawned on me that maybe, though it isn't a bad idea, maybe it just reinforced the idea that there wasn't really enough for everyone, that because these families were poor, they didn't deserve anyone's real or deep generosity. That thought had never come to me. But once Ken asked the question, I couldn't stop thinking about it. Sure, his idea had some drawbacks, but it seemed to the Session that it was worth trying, at least for one

year's Christmas efforts. So we asked for one family. We got clothes for each family member, and some things from their wish list. We got them bed linens and kitchen towels. We bought pots and pans. We picked out games and toys. When we all brought all the presents to the collection point at the church, well, it was a ridiculous amount of things. Definitely an abundance.

You may not remember, and you can be forgiven if you've forgotten, because I had to go look it up, but toward the end of January, we read the passage from the Gospel of John about the wedding at Cana, when Jesus turned the water into wine, his first public act of ministry in John's Gospel. And you might remember that one of the things I said was that it was a ridiculous amount of wine—768 bottles by my calculations. We traced this theme through the Gospel of John, said that it was kind of a “go big” Gospel, from stating that Jesus was present from the beginning of time, through the prologue telling us that we have received “grace upon grace,” through Jesus telling Nicodemus that God so loved the whole world, through Jesus telling his listeners that he had come to bring life abundant.

Today's passage aligns with this same theme of fullness and abundance and grace upon grace. But this time it isn't Jesus doing the giving abundantly, it's Mary. Jesus is receiving abundantly. This time, Jesus is at his friends' home, Mary and Martha and Lazarus. He has raised Lazarus from the dead—remember what we said about the Gospel of John going big, after all. In John, the resurrection of Lazarus is what initiates the plots to kill Jesus. The authorities are worried about his power. That undercurrent is in this passage as well. They're eating supper—Martha is serving, as Martha does. Mary is serving, too, but in a different way. She pours this expensive perfume all over Jesus's feet and wipes it with her hair. I'm not sure how much a pound of nard would be. A pound of water, Google tells me, is about two cups. Judas measures it in terms of money—a year's wages for a day laborer. So, in today's terms, if a laborer got paid \$12 an hour and worked a full day every week day for a year, which I realize is unrealistic but I'm trying to get a number, that works out to around \$25,000. Twenty five grand in perfume, which Mary has just poured on Jesus's feet and then wiped off with her hair. It is, again, a ridiculous amount, an extravagance beyond imagining except they were seeing her do it right there in front of them.

Judas says she should have sold that perfume and given that money to the poor. The author tells us, in parentheses, that Judas just wanted to steal that money from the common purse. But what he says is not wrong. It's certain that \$25,000 could help a lot of people. Imagine if I called Stephanie at the Food Bank

this afternoon and said we wanted to donate \$25,000. She could feed a lot of people on that amount of money. Judas's calculations, if he really meant what he said, are true.

But neither Mary nor Jesus are calculating the meaning of her gift in terms of ounces or pounds or dollars or denarii. It is a gift of love, and love doesn't get calculated in those ways. Mary's gift to Jesus is an overflowing of her love for him, her gratitude for his ministry, and her prayers for the future. It's pretty clear to everyone in the room that Jesus is not going to be with them much longer, and he says it himself by saying Mary was saving the perfume to anoint him at his death. Mary's act of sacrifice and love foreshadows Jesus's washing the disciples' feet, and Jesus's act of love and sacrifice at the cross.

We don't often think of Jesus *needing* something, but maybe Jesus *needed* Mary to anoint him, to care for him, to encourage him, to give him strength for what he knew was coming. He needed love, just like any human being does. And maybe Mary equally needed to find a way to express her love for her friend and teacher. Her love poured out just like the perfume, in overflowing, ridiculous abundance.

In the next chapter, Jesus will command his disciples to love one another. They know what that means, both because Jesus has shown them, and Mary has shown them too. What it means to love one another is to sacrifice and to overflow with abundance of love. It means to calculate based on a different measuring system entirely. It's not a different scale, but a different system. Where more may not be better, where big isn't necessarily more valuable. Loving one another can't be measured with measuring cups nor tape measures nor calculators.

There's plenty to critique about the way we went about showering that family with Christmas gifts—we didn't really take into consideration if they had room in their living situation for the great pile of gifts we gave them; we didn't think about whether it might be more respectful to give them gift cards so that they could go shopping for their own children; we were—as all humans are—at least partly motivated by how good it made us feel to do something for someone else. But it was an outpouring of love, an overflowing abundance of ridiculous proportions. Calculating it in terms of how much money we spent, or how much time it took us, or if our resources could have been used more efficiently, avoids the heart of the matter, which is that we were striving to love one another, to love our neighbor, with an overflowing and sacrificial and abundant love that we first received from Jesus himself, just as Mary did.

When we follow Mary's example and love extravagantly, we will encounter opposition and judgment. Sometimes it comes from within ourselves. Sometimes it comes from someone else. Sometimes, but not always, that someone else may have selfish and sinister motivations, like Judas did. I will encourage you, and ask you to encourage me, to make a different calculation, to live and love abundantly.