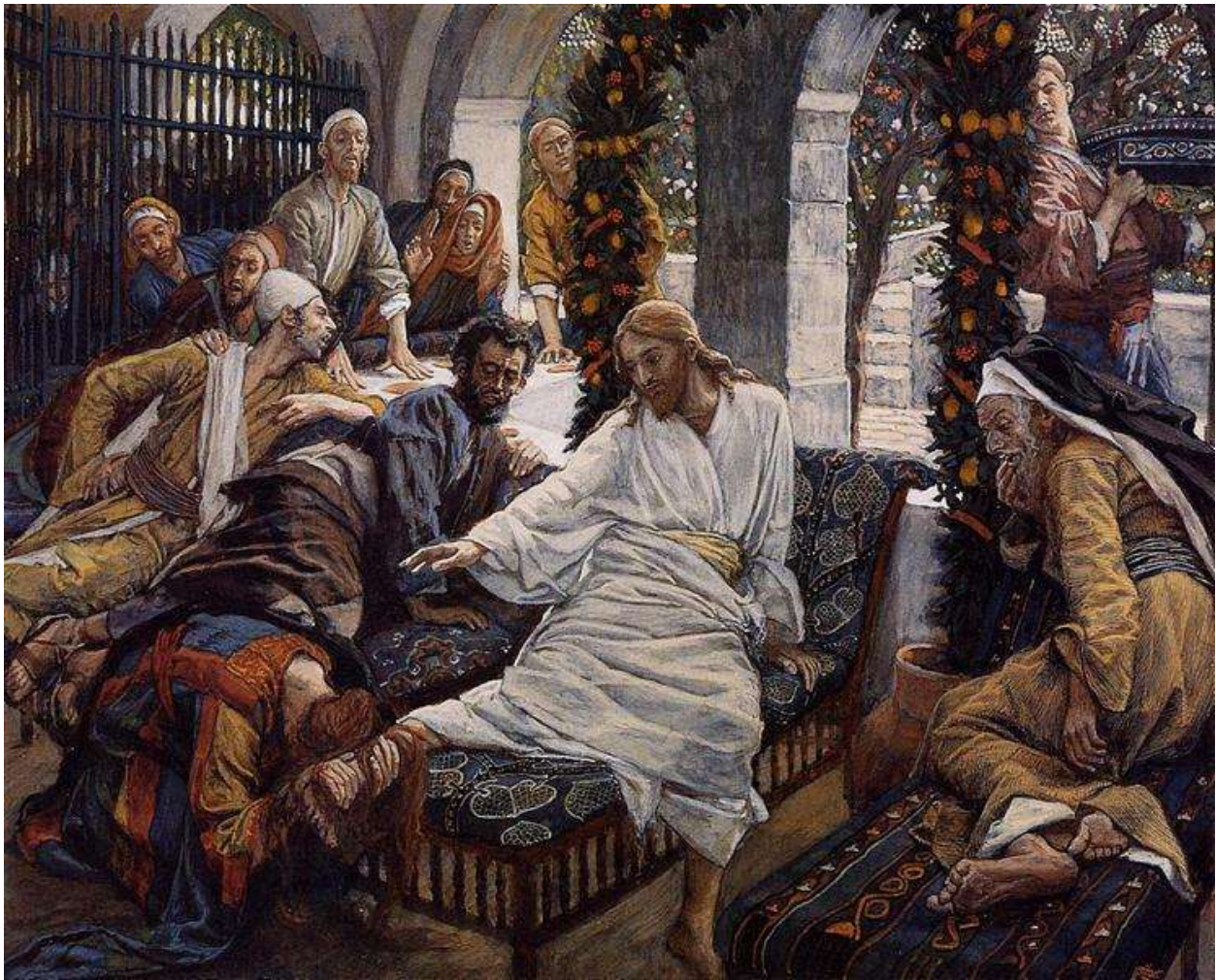




April 7, 2019 - Foolish Generosity
Given by Rev. Mattei

[John 12:1-8](#)



Extraordinary acts of generosity by those who can least afford them are confusing and inspiring at the same time.

A Washington state homeless man, Kevin Booth, was shocked to discover a paper bag full of cash outside the Sumner Food Bank, where he was

waiting in line to receive food. “At first, I was like, what the heck is that lying on the ground?” Mr. Booth said in an interview with the local newspaper, the *News Tribune*. “Of course, I sniffed it to see if it was real. Then I was like, do I take off or do I stay?” Mr. Booth waited another twenty minutes for the Food Bank to open and then brought it to Anita Miller, the food bank director. Inside the bag was \$17,000. Anita and Kevin called the police to see if there was an outstanding reason for the bag of cash and filed a report.

After ninety days with no claims on the cash, it was decided that the \$17,000 would be given to the Food Bank and a ceremony would be given for Mr. Booth. The police remarked that “not everyone would be as honest in this situation”. The staff at the food bank worked to get Mr. Booth warm shoes and a warm jacket for the cold Washington winters, as well as some gift cards as a reward, but he refused more and has appreciated Sumner Food Bank. The food bank was able to purchase a much-needed walk-in freezer so they could further support the needs of the community with the found gift. Ms. Miller refers to Mr. Booth as “a very honest man. For his part, Booth told the *News Tribune*: “There are a lot of people who would have taken it. I’m just not that person.”¹

According to the gospel of John, the religious leaders have made up their mind to arrest Jesus and he is in hiding until the Festival of the Passover ([Jn 10:39-40](#)). The death of Lazarus pulls him out of hiding for the duration of the resuscitation ([Jn 11:1-44](#)) but then he returns to the wilderness, to the remote city of Ephraim ([Jn 11:45-57](#)).

¹<https://www.elitereaders.net/homeless-man-finds-17000-cash-and-donates-it-to-food-bank-to-feed-hungry-people/?cn-reloaded=1>

Not long after the event and six days before the Passover, Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem via Bethany, where he stops at the home of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. They are so grateful for Jesus' intervention in the resuscitation of Lazarus that they throw a party in Jesus' honor. Martha is quick to serve as a good hostess while her sister, Mary, is more inclined to sit at the feet of Jesus as also Luke reports in his gospel ([Lk 10:38-42](#)). Lazarus is at the table with those entertaining Jesus. At one point, Mary stops everybody in their conversations as she performs an act of unthinkable absurdity and foolishness: she takes out a jar of very expensive, fragrant ointment to pour on Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair. The value of that expensive oil is equivalent to a year's wage for the average worker. The action is not only absurd but also unlawful: in Jewish culture, it was admissible to add droplets of perfume to the water a host would use to wash his or her guests' feet, but using pure nard was seen to be a waste and a violation of the Torah, in which one is commanded not to be wasteful. A full "pound" of pure nard used that way was inconceivable.² The meaning of this gesture is explained by Jesus in v. 7: it is meant for Jesus' burial. This is not an act of celebration and rejoicing. This is an act of mourning, and since it's an act of mourning it fits in with the law.

The reference to his death is also hidden (*to the non-Jew*) in the opening verse of ch. 12: "Six days before the Passover." Passover lambs were purchased six days in advance. This allowed them to be brought in, often into the family home and the anointing oil would be rubbed it into the ankles and feet, prior to them being inspected for the following five days to ensure that they were free from blemish. The lamb was anointed a second time on

² <https://inspired2think.wordpress.com/2015/04/11/understanding-the-significance-of-jesus-being-anointed>

the head two days prior to Passover to announce that it was free from disease or blemish. The head of Jesus was anointed two days before He was crucified (Mk 14:1-3).

The meaning of the costly anointing for burial is not lost on Jesus or on the hosts. Granted, all Judas, the thief, could see is the waste of money. But Mary sees something more. She is the one who spoke to Jesus with a sense of resignation when she noticed that Jesus had arrived too late to save her brother, Lazarus, from death. She was at Jesus' feet when she spoke, but her words stung with powerlessness: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." ([Jn 11:32](#))

But she is not the same person of a few weeks earlier. She perceives her Lord's love and intention for going to Jerusalem. She knows this is absurd, sacrificial Love on his part. Mary has understood the call of the prophet: "Oh you who thirst, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant." ([Isaiah 55:1-3](#))

She perceives what Paul also understands: once you commune with the Lord you don't need anything else, you don't *want* anything else ([Psalm 23](#)); everything else is useless rubbish ([Phil 3:7-11](#)). A simple, unencumbered and generous life becomes the testimony of the true disciple. Mary spills her perfume with wild abandon for no other reason

than the joy of being with Jesus. There is no sense that this is a waste. There is nothing but sheer love and gratitude for what Jesus has done.

The poor will be always with us: not words that sting with powerlessness but a recognition that in the face of Jesus' physical absence we have them to remind us of him, a sacrament of his perpetual presence. Jesus' words can also be interpreted to be a command: "Have the poor always with you; watch after them." Jesus establishes a parallel between himself and the poor. Now he is present, and Mary rightly feels the need to be extravagant. When he is no longer present in the flesh, the poor will still be there—to be served with the same extravagance.

May we not be found joyless but generous and in love with Jesus, with the poor. Amen.