

“Life Poured Out.”

SCRIPTURE INTROS

John 12: 1 - 8

- The theme of the scripture tonight is “life, abundant life with Jesus”. We know this because it’s set at Passover time, which is a time of celebrating the passing from death to life. , and because it takes place in the home of Lazarus whom Jesus brought back to life.
- There’s a problem in the story: Lazarus’s sister pours a whole jar of expensive perfume over Jesus feet- it’s worth \$40,000!. Judas hinks this is a serious problem- the money could have been used for the poor.
- But the real problem is what Jesus says: “ the poor will always be with you” – as though he is dismissing the poor as unimportant beside him, and indeed these words are used colloquially to justify not giving to the poor.
- It’s a problem not only because we don’t like the words, but because they go counter to everything we find in scripture, and are so completely opposite to Jesus actual behavior in caring for and being on the side of the poor, that we have to look for some other interpretation here!
- I would suggest as we listen to the scripture that rather than contrasting two potential recipients of a large sum of money, rather than contrasting Jesus with the poor, we contrast instead two disciples: Mary and Judas.
- We contrast the spirit that is in them, their spirit of giving: Mary who pours it all out, and Judas who calculates carefully.

So, with these thoughts in mind, let’s listen for the word of God as it comes to us tonight. John 12: 1-8

SERMON

Life is short. We need to live it- to truly live before we die. In today's scripture Mary's action epitomises “Life” with a capital L. She mirrors Jesus way of living and giving, the way that brings abundant life. So I'd like to look at what this passage tells us about how to live an abundant life.

There are three aspects I'd like to highlight: Risking; Giving one's best, one's fullest; Doing it now.

Firstly, risking. Mary risks by stepping beyond the bounds of social convention. In the context of her day, she is behaving as a loose woman- it was totally unacceptable for a woman to let down her hair in public.

In wiping Jesus feet with her hair she is behaving like the lowliest of slaves- It sounds pretty horrible to us, but in the absence of paper towels a master would wipe his greasy hands on the hair of his lowest female slave.

So Mary is completely ignoring the social rules of propriety. She risks her reputation, in order to pour out her love.

In her risking herself in this way, she mirrors Jesus, who goes against every convention about the Messiah. The conventional expectation was that the Messiah would come on a war horse, defeat the enemy in battle, and could not himself be killed.

In contrast, Jesus kneels before his disciples like a slave, washes their feet, allows himself to be humiliated, hangs naked and suffering on a cross for all the world to see.

And he takes the greatest risk of all, -he dies, descends into death. Throws himself away, hurls himself on the mercy of God. And he does this because he is who he is, not who people expect him to be.

He's an entirely new kind of Messiah, who pours out his life to release abundant life into the world. And he must be true to himself.

To live life with a capital L, we need to be true to ourselves, to the person God has created us to be, and this may mean at times stepping outside of convention and the expectations of people, and risking and trusting what God will do.

There was a wonderful movie several years ago called Queen of the Bandits. A true life story, which showed graphically the terrible power that men have over women in so many other parts of the world. It's not a movie for those with a weak stomach! The heroine in the story is a low caste Hindu woman, Poolan.

Poolan at age 11 is sold by her father, as a bride. This is the beginning of a long story of rape and abuse. Even at age 11 Poolan, surprisingly, has spirit, she somehow senses that she deserves better, and she does the unthinkable- she runs away from her husband.

This forever after puts her in a very vulnerable position - she is fair game for abuse from every man.

The more she resists, the greater the fury of the men and the worse the abuse they dream up in order to teach her her place, which, in that culture, is to serve men's needs. When her life couldn't it seems get any worse, there comes a turning point.

She is rescued from a bandit who has kidnapped and raped her. The man who rescues her is a Muslim, -his faith teaches him to respect women. And he teaches her to defend herself, to fire a gun. She wears an army uniform.

And she totally defies all social convention concerning women. Living as a bandit she behaves as a kind of Robin Hood. She becomes a legend among the poor – she's even seen as a goddess, one who offers hope to every child bride, to every woman and low caste man.

She is so loved by the poor that when the government clamps down on banditry and kills all the bandits they can lay hands on, they do not dare to kill Poolan. She surrenders in the end, but presents a list of demands on behalf of the low caste and the poor.

Eventually, when a Hindu government came into power in 1994, she was released from prison. She's a woman with the courage to risk. Through her breaking the bounds of social convention, people's eyes were opened to see women and those of low caste as PEOPLE who also had rights.

Like Mary in today's scripture, she imitates an aspect of Christ- her boldness of action, her risking, and this is still spreading ripples of hope and abundant life in her community. That is the first way to life with a capital L – having the courage to risk.

Secondly, abundant life comes through giving one's very best, giving one's whole self to what one does; never asking if it is deserved or too much. - In today's scripture, Mary does not measure or count the cost of what is poured out, she just lavishes it all over the feet of Jesus.

To the shock of practical Judas. Poor Judas, he cannot bear to see such waste. He sees so many practical possibilities that could be done with that money.

John suggests that Judas doesn't really want to give that money to the poor- perhaps when we measure too carefully what we give, we find that we cannot give it all, we hold onto some for ourselves. Poor Judas, with his practicality, perhaps he could see no practical use for Jesus' ways- his gentleness, his loving the enemy, his forgiving.

Judas is so unlike Mary, who seems to "get it". In her extravagant giving we see God's love – how God's love is poured out in abundance on every one of us, how God never asks whether we deserve it or

not, never measures, never rations, never reaches a limit, never says, "OK that's enough now for you." Mary imitates God's extravagant love.

When I lived in England I knew a minister who also poured himself out in an extravagant way. I know that I would not be here today if it were not for a Daniel Jenkins. He poured himself heart and soul into his sermons - Each Sunday he delivered two sermons, morning and evening, both of the highest quality.

He gave his very best, and never seemed to question the fact that there were only a dozen or so people sitting in the congregation. He never asked the question whether we were worth it- he gave his all.

Were there results? I think so: three people from his congregation set up their own congregational church; one of them trained for ministry and is still the minister of that congregation; three of us became ministers in Canada and the United States.

I don't know how Daniel's giving his best affected the OTHER dozen or so people. But I am convinced that whether one is a small group leader and just a couple of people who show up, or whether one is working with street people or people in a hospital or prison- just one person at a time.

Whatever small area of service we're called to, when we give our very best, without measuring or asking how much is deserved, then life with a capital L results.

So firstly, the way to Life is through boldness to risk, stepping outside of the box; and secondly giving one's very best, one's whole self; and thirdly, by seizing the moment, doing it now -

This is what Jesus praises. It's not a question of who receives; the poor COULD be recipients of this kind of passionate giving, It's not a question of who; it's a question of timing - of recognising and seizing the God-moment. Do it NOW.

What's the need before us NOW? Is there a good thing to do? Do it NOW. This leads to Life with a capital L.

Nicholas Green, an 8 year old American boy, was killed by a random act of violence while on vacation with his family in Italy.

In the midst of this terrible trauma, with Nicholas brain dead, but on life support, his parents were called on to make an urgent decision - would they say yes to the doctors, who were requesting organs for transplant. And there in this foreign country, while in the throes of shock and grief and loss, they made the decision to give what they could, as a gift of life to others.

The recipients of the transplants were later interviewed on television: We saw the woman who'd received his liver, - she was so overwhelmed with emotion she could hardly find the words to speak ,of how she had been dying and now she was alive;

And there was the boy who had Nicholas's heart - he hoped that Nicholas's sister would see him as a brother; and there was the woman who could now see, because she had a new cornea. There was the kidney recipient, and so on. Seven people had received new life as a result of that decision of the moment.

And not just seven people - Italy is a country with the lowest rate of organ donations anywhere. In the fall of that year, there was a substantial increase in donations, as people were moved by the effects of this one family's gift.

The Italians dubbed it the Nicholas effect. There is a school in Italy renamed the Nicholas Green elementary school. There is a tree of peace planted in honour of Nicholas, and a mayor promising to plant a tree for every child born in his village.

A decision made in a moment, a moment of possibility, moved by love. A decision that led to a great abundance of life, Life with a capital L. In today's scripture Jesus says basically, "Now is the time. I am with you NOW. Now is the moment to pour yourself out. Now is the moment to love"

Do we want to truly live? Then we need to risk - to go beyond the bounds of convention. We need to give our very best in whatever service we do, and and we need to not delay, to do it now.

In this extravagant, passionate pouring out of ourselves, now, we open a way for God, as Isaiah says, to do something new - to give to us and others the abundant life that God promises.

To God be all the praise the honour and the glory. Amen.