

April 7, '18, Anthon UMC, John 12.1-8, "How Extravagant Are You?"
By Sheryl K Ashley

So how extravagant are you? And about what? We have two stories this morning of extravagance. There's Mary, the sister of Lazarus and there's Paul who used to go by the name of Saul. Both gave extravagantly in their own way...both giving their best gift, not caring what others thought or said or even did to them.

Let's begin with Paul as he had the most to say. Paul gave so extravagantly...He poured out his very own self... He wrote about his genetic and cultural makeup in the book of Philippians. Paul talked openly about his pedigree. You'd think he'd done the "23 and Me" spit test and knew where all his DNA came from and he could tell you how it made him the man he was! Greatness was in his genes. The world knew it and he knew it. I believe there's good genetics in all of us (yes there are!) and it's up to us to accomplish all we can with whatever greatness God has put into us.

Paul openly shares about who he is in our second reading of Phil. Have you ever heard anyone boasting about their education, their position, their intelligence, their accomplishments, their house, and while they sounded like braggarts what they said was true and you could not equal them in the eyes of the world no matter how hard you tried? Such people are awesome

to many but depressing to compete with. In fact, the jealousy of just being or having any extravagant talent or possession out of ordinary, especially in today's world can bring one to be a victim of violence. Look at the recent murder of popular rapper Nipsey Hussle, age 33 who growing up poor, was talented and became famous. This former gang banger was now doing good things for others who needed help, often hiring former convicts to work in his clothing design store. He had it all, but was recently gunned down by another rapper who was jealous of Nipsey's extravagant lifestyle and popularity and talent being used for good, so he ended Nipsey's life with several well-placed shots.

Paul in his day, had bragging rights that would put any of us to shame and that finally resulted in Paul's death by the Romans as a martyr, but not until after he had accomplished what he had been called to do. He had it all too. And he could, and did, in our second reading list them for us. I counted 7 "I" phrases (plus) on his list. Count 'em with me... "I had more physical advantages than others. I was circumcised on the 8th day. I am, not only from the chosen people of Israel but from the favored tribe of Benjamin. I am a Hebrew of the Hebrews (a pure breed Jew). I am a leader in the law, (a Pharisee) and I harassed the church (torturing Christians, jailing them.) I am righteous and blameless under the law."

Paul, once known as Saul, was once on his way to the big time and his reputation preceded him. He thought he was doing exactly what God called him to do, (as many of us do) but when he met the God of Israel for real, his pride in his extravagantly blessed life changed considerably. He gave up that life and never looked back.

Some of you may have climbed the right ladder to success by virtue of birth (silver spoon in mouth) and /or by effort (degrees, hard work, and determination) and find yourselves, as a perfect fit for a perfect seeming life, when God calls you to do something else. How could anyone ever give up the good life? How do missionaries for example, leave all, pack up their children and go where life isn't so easy just to serve and save souls? I'll tell you how Paul did. Paul got a big whiff of Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus on his way to torture and arrest Christians. That whiff of God's Sonlight knocked him blind and senseless to the ground. He arose with a new sense of what extravagant service to God meant. Paul arose with a new view of extravagance...God had chosen him to be God's evangelist to the whole known world. He was never the same after, "The Way, the Truth and the Life" was personally revealed to him. I'm sure none of us assembled here want to be knocked to the ground to hear our call from God, but sometimes the knocks in our life that do throw us to the ground,

are the things that bring us closer to realizing that we need to let go of some things in life we thought were so important, in order to answer the extravagantly costly, spiritually rewarding call of God.

And so, Paul, who had an extravagant upwardly mobile life of Pharisee faith, and was fighting those Christians, called “Followers of the Way” to maintain it, surrendered it all, and found a new way to spend his new found riches. Paul was a smart man and he was a dedicated man and when he compared the riches of knowing and following Jesus Christ to all his earthly treasures and accomplishments and titles, Paul could see that all he had given up was “sewer trash” in comparison to gaining the righteousness of Christ. Some might have called him a fool as this tent-maker never again had a house, but more often was sheltered in a prison cell. God had placed a great call on Paul’s life to change the world and because Paul answered that call, we today are enabled to be called to change the world through serving Jesus Christ today as the church.

Paul was just as committed to his calling to enter into the life and suffering and death of Jesus Christ as he had been committed in his past to hunting down Christians. But Paul was more humble about his great victories in Christ than he was with his worldly successes of houses and money and power. Gone is his earthly bravado and confidence in his

earthly power. He shockingly states in this letter to the Philippians that he “might perhaps” reach the goal of the resurrection. If Paul was not sure he had it made, and since he kept running full speed toward extravagantly spending his life and energy like it was boundless riches given to him to be spent on saving souls, Paul, this great Lion of God, suffered for it and would one day die for this cause. But God used Paul to build His kingdom, traveling 10s of 1000s of miles into all the known world sharing the gospel without stopping. If Paul was not sure he had it made, and if he kept running full speed toward his purpose, who are we to think we can sit back and think we have it made by living comfortable uninvolved lives, hoarding like misers the extravagant gifts God has placed within us? Paul was determined to press onward for the upward prize of the heavenly calling of God in Jesus Christ. Now that’s extravagant. How extravagant are we who are only here by the grace of God shining through the amazing Apostle Paul and others, who held nothing back from loving Jesus?

The other extravagant person in our lectionary reading today who held nothing back was of course Mary, sister of Lazarus and Martha, probably the baby sister, the one who quietly stands in the shadow of the elder siblings. Mary seemed more introspective than her sister, quietly sitting at Jesus’ feet, so thankful to him for saving their brother Lazarus from the

grave, calling Lazarus back out into the sunshine of life, commanding death to let loose its grip with the power of God Himself. That news had to make the Pharisees angry to the core and frightened to the fringes of their tassels of their robes, hearing that Jesus had a power beyond their own. And yet they knew this Jesus was a man and a man bleeds, and a man can be killed, and so the planning began. Jesus knew this was coming if he dared to raise Lazarus. He's counted the cost of saving a friend. In doing so, He had signed his own death warrant. He'd already done some pretty extravagant deeds of mercy and power to upset the status quo. There is no better way to get yourself killed than upsetting the status quo of people in power. And so, Jesus would soon be on His way to suffering and death and even though it was for that purpose He came, there was a sadness about him that Mary, with her listening ears and empathetic heart ached to soothe. So, Mary gave the best she had...the extravagant gift of her very own burial perfume, about the size of a Coke can, worth 300 denarii or about \$30,000 in our money. She anointed Jesus' feet with this burial ointment as if she knew what was coming. And she overturned propriety by wiping his feet with her hair. Good grief woman! That's almost an immoral act! What a risk taker a youngest child can be! Mary didn't care! Mary was extravagant in her love for Jesus. She was willing to give the best she had

and she being willing to be thought to be a fool for Christ. This was something she and Paul held in common. The scent of it filled the house and beyond. Some perfumes do that for they are made of potent stuff. We had a lady in this church who wore that kind of perfume extravagantly. She was a wonderful woman who, while she could have hired someone to clean church in her place, came to this church wearing heels and climbed on a ladder to clean even high places. She stopped by often at the office to talk about some decision with Pastor Joe-d DowlingSoka. After she left the scent of her perfume lingered so strongly for so long, he would ask me, who served as Anthon's secretary at that time, to open the doors and windows to let the smell out. It was that kind of expensive, long-lasting ointment that Mary sacrificed for Jesus and for which Judas criticized her for being so foolish to waste on someone's feet. He has other plans for it. He didn't get what was going on, even though he would play a big part in getting Jesus taken prisoner by the Roman guards and crucified.

Both of these stories today ask us to consider the question, how extravagant are we who are only here by the grace of God shining through the amazing Mary, Paul, and others who hold nothing back in their love of Jesus? As we come near to Good Friday we come to be reminded that every act of love and sacrifice that we do proclaims our love for Christ until

all the world can see as a mere reflection of the extravagant love of Jesus
Christ for us.