

THIRD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARCH 13, 2016
Ernest F. Krug, III, MDiv, MD

INTENTIONS MATTER

John 12: 1-8

As I sat in our Annual Meeting last Sunday, I listened to the variety of sentiments that one would expect to hear in a discussion about a church budget that struggles to be balanced and still meet all the pressing needs around us. There was the feeling that we should make a priority of not cutting spending for mission. Can we be the church of Jesus Christ and not give generously to those in need? There was the feeling that we should insure a decent raise for our staff. Aren't we obligated to care for them and show our appreciation for their service? There was the belief that we must be responsible and approve a balanced budget—if we increase one cost, we must reduce or eliminate another. You can't spend what you don't have. These are all important principles. The challenge, of course, is how to prioritize them. Underlying these principles is the assumption that we are dealing either with an abundance of resources not fully tapped, or a scarcity of resources that must be recognized, with appropriate cutbacks put in place. The reality, of course, is never perfectly clear. If we err on the side of assuming abundance, when there are, in fact, limited resources, we may cause much pain down the road, saddling a future congregation with crippling debt. If we err on the side of assuming limited resources, when there is an abundance to draw from, we limit our capacity to serve Christ in the world and may be ignoring a call to discipleship. There is no perfect answer, and any decision brings risk. So, what mindset

is most honest and most conducive to good stewardship: a mindset of scarcity or a mindset of abundance?

Our Gospel story contains all these elements. And this story suggests to me that it is not our mindset that is important, and it is only partially our intentions that matter. What really matters is God's intention and a person's or a community's response to God's intention in a particular time and place. Consider the elements of the story: Mary sees clearly that Jesus will soon die, and she anoints his feet with nard, as one would prepare a body for burial. Judas is another key player in this scene, and he sees things differently. So we have two persons, Mary and Judas, with different perspectives and different intentions. And then there is Jesus, who always sheds light on God's intention. Jesus defends Mary's action with the comment, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." This could be used as a rationale for placing religious piety ahead of social justice concerns. If we can understand what is happening in this story, I believe we begin to understand what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. And hopefully we can also see what response God is calling from us at Third Presbyterian.

We know from the Gospel of John that Jesus had a close relationship with Mary, her sister, Martha, and her brother, Lazarus. Just preceding the story of Mary anointing Jesus' feet is the story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead. You will recall that Jesus is met by Martha as he enters Bethany, and she declares that Jesus is "the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." Mary also comes out to meet Jesus, and at the sight of her weeping, Jesus weeps. After the raising of Lazarus, Jesus must be especially concerned about his own safety. The chief priests and the Pharisees are increasingly concerned that more and more people will follow Jesus, bringing down

upon them the wrath of the Roman Empire. Despite the risk, Jesus returns to Bethany where he attends a party in his honor. The scene is now set. It is six days before the Passover. There are those who want Jesus to avoid risks and be responsible. There are those who want Jesus to lead a revolt against the Roman oppressors. There are those who want Jesus to stop criticizing the religious establishment and just do good things for people. Jesus is sitting around a table with the men, possibly discussing goals and priorities. In comes Mary, who kneels in front of Jesus, and anoints his feet with a very expensive perfumed ointment imported from the Himalayas, wiping his feet with her hair. Such behavior was shocking then and would be even more shocking today.

If we are honest, we have to admit that we would tend to side with Judas in condemning such a profligate act. We care about keeping to a budget and wasting money goes against our grain. So the question we must ask is this: What is Mary getting right? And what are we missing NOW in our daily living that Mary can teach us? First, it is clear that Mary loved Jesus. Some suggest that she loved him because he raised her brother from the dead, but her action was not simply a “thank you” gift. Her action may be considered the first act of discipleship in John’s Gospel. She wipes Jesus’ feet with her hair, and the same Greek word for “wipe” is used to describe Jesus washing and wiping the disciples’ feet with a towel in John 13. Jesus says that he does this as an example of the servant leadership he desires for those who call themselves his disciples. Mary understands what it means to be moved by love and grace *before* Jesus provides a demonstration for his disciples. Mary must have seen something, perceived something that the men in Jesus’ company did not yet perceive. And she brought not just an intellectual commitment to Jesus’ teachings, but also an emotional commitment.

Mary teaches us about the extravagance that comes from a certain kind of love. And we must be careful to identify the kind of love being displayed in Mary's action. This is not the love of two persons who care about each other, though Mary cared a lot about Jesus, and he clearly cared a lot about Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. This is not sexual love, though Mary may have had deep feelings for Jesus and perhaps he for her. This is not religious love, that is, it is not simply her love for something good and beautiful. No this outpouring of EXTRAVAGANT LOVE is a human response to God's love, which is itself extravagant. Remember the story of the wedding at Cana in John 2? Jesus turned water into 180 gallons of new wine. The guests couldn't possible consume that much—and Jesus provided this wine from water after the guests had already consumed all the wine the host had provided! Remember the 12 baskets of leftovers after Jesus fed the 5,000 in John 6 with five loaves of bread and two fish? Remember in John 21—after the resurrection--when Jesus appears on the shore at the Sea of Galilee. Peter is in his boat after an unsuccessful night trying to catch fish. Jesus tells him to cast the net on the right side of the boat, and the catch of fish is so huge Peter can't haul it into his boat? Do we see a pattern here? These stories are important metaphors for God's love and grace in action.

This kind of love, the love of God for us, is not purposed to build portfolios or save us from catastrophes or grant us favors or save communities from financial disaster. This kind of love is a new perspective that gives insight into God's purposes for humankind. It enables us to see God's truth and respond with an extravagant

outpouring of love. It is easily critiqued as too costly, unrealistic, or irresponsible. But it is God's love empowering our human love to see what God sees and to respond as God would have us respond. It doesn't happen that often, but when it happens, the faithful rejoice, and the rest miss the point and grumble.

So what did Mary perceive that no one else did? Two things: she perceived that she was in the presence of God, and she perceived that this man, Jesus, who embodied that presence, would die. These are really big perceptions when you consider that Jesus' disciples hadn't yet comprehended fully who Jesus was or why he needed to die. In Jesus' presence Mary truly experienced generous love, and she found it catching. And all people of faith who find themselves in the presence of Jesus Christ find extravagant, generous love catching. Judas' response to Mary's action, "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages," is the response of someone who has heard Jesus' words but doesn't comprehend Jesus' intention. Jesus' intention was to die for God's children, and that was worthy of costly recognition. Judas's sin is to stifle the extravagant gift of another person who gives it out of love for Jesus. The critical piece is that Mary's expression of love is a call to discipleship. That kind of love is missing for Judas. Moreover, Judas has a mindset of scarcity; Mary has a mindset of abundance. Both are standing in the presence of God. Like Mary and Judas we all stand in the presence of God, and we sometimes respond like Mary, caught up in extravagant grace. And sometimes, we respond like Judas, intellectually on target perhaps, but doubting that God is really at work among us.

But how do we know whether God is present in this place, at this time? How do we know what our response should be? Mary's action suggests that the response of discipleship is a natural act of love in response to God's grace. God's grace makes it happen to serve God's purposes. And Jesus teaches us that prayer keeps us oriented to God's purposes.

I recently read a book that some of you have also read: *When Breath Becomes Air* by Paul Kalanithi. Dr. Kalanithi was diagnosed with metastatic lung cancer and died very soon after completing his residency in neurosurgery. He writes in this memoir that he considered being a pastor. He wanted to understand how people find meaning in their lives and was drawn to neurosurgery. He wanted to be the kind of neurosurgeon who cares about his patient's identity and sources of meaning before he operates on the individual's brain. He became a highly skilled neurosurgeon, sought after by the most renowned neurosurgery programs, but his life ended all too soon. What he discovered as he faced his approaching death is that love and relationships are what really matter in life, not fame, fortune, or the high esteem of others. His quest to become the best neurosurgeon he could be almost ended his marriage. But when he received his terminal diagnosis, he realized he needed his wife more than he had ever thought. He expresses regret that we all often need death to shake us up and help us get our priorities straight.

Dr. Kalanithi's wife, Lucy, wrote these words in the Epilogue to Paul's book: "...one trick to managing a terminal illness is to be deeply in love—to be vulnerable, kind, generous, and grateful." I suspect that Mary in our Gospel story could have written

similar words about Jesus. Mary and Jesus shared vulnerability, kindness, generosity, and gratefulness to God. There are those here today who have experienced those same emotions caring for persons they love and living out ministry in this church. What was unique about Jesus was his capacity to embrace all people with those emotions, even Judas, suffering with us all in whatever painful situations we find ourselves in. We don't know what pain Mary experienced in her life, but we know that in Jesus she found an outpouring of love and grace that produced in her a like response. She was gripped by grace, just as we can be blessed to be gripped by grace in this place and time.

So, whose intentions matter?—God's, first and foremost. It is our task to prayerfully determine if our intentions are aligned with God's. My challenge to you this morning is this: Consider how we should each respond to the presence of Jesus Christ in our lives, as individuals and as a community of faith. When you have had to trust in God because your own resources were inadequate, when you have felt utterly vulnerable or betrayed, have you experienced God's grace through a kind and generous person? When you have witnessed vulnerability and pain in a community, have you found yourself responding with kindness and generosity? This is God's grace at work. We all stand, or kneel, in the presence of Christ, and when we perceive the power of that presence to transform us, we receive grace to respond with generous love and grateful hearts. May it be so for all of us. Amen.