**“Reckless Devotion is a Beautiful Thing”** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake
Fifth Sunday of Lent The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
John 12:1-8 Saint Paul, Minnesota
April 6, 2025

*Has anyone here seen the Saint John’s Bible?* Let me tell you about it:

***The Saint John's Bible*** is the first completely handwritten and illuminated Bible commissioned by a Benedictine abbey since the invention of the printing press. Headed by Donald Jackson, work took place in Wales and Minnesota. Commissioned by the Benedictine monks at Saint John's University, work began in 1998 and was completed in December 2011, costing over $8 million. The Bible is divided into seven volumes, each two feet tall by three feet wide when open. Written on vellum by quill, it contains 160 illuminations and uses the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (NRSV-CE).

Presbyterian Minister and Writer, MaryAnn McKibben Dana, has a story about this. She said:

*“Several years ago I taught a Sunday School class on the Saint John's Bible, a beautiful hand-calligraphed and illustrated version of the Bible that took several years and a whole team of artists to create. I showed the class a video about how the project came together, and the class was spellbound, as I knew they'd be. The illuminations make you want to lean into the scripture. The Saint John's Bible fosters awe and wonder toward the God who gives us not only the sacred story but also the artists who make it come alive.*

*Near the end of the video, the narrator shares the cost of this tremendous project--which numbered in the millions of dollars. And in an instant, the mood in the room shifted, from awe at the holiness of the gift to alarm at the extravagant price tag.*

They asked: *Why was the money wasted in this way? This money could have been given to the poor.”*

Which brings us to today’s Gospel reading.

Martha is serving, as in Luke 10:38–42. Lazarus is reclining at the table with Jesus. Mary comes to the table with a pound of genuine, expensive perfume, an anointing and burial ointment. She chooses to expend it on Jesus amid the meal. She knows there might not be an opportunity later.

It is customary for a servant or host to wash their guest’s feet upon arriving for a meal—a posture Jesus himself assumes in John 13. It is customary to anoint the body of the deceased prior to burial, as the women do in Matthew, Mark, and Luke and as Nicodemus does in John 19. *Mary enacts a spontaneous conflation of these rituals.* Her rite is lavish, intimate, and sensual. She takes the perfume and anoints Jesus’ feet, wiping them with her hair. The house fills with the fragrance of the perfume.

We can imagine how the dinner would proceed: *the light dims and oil lamps glow, the wine flows, tears mix with laughter. The diners and disciples listen to their Teacher one more time. They know that the danger is near, that the hours are few, and they savor the moments they have shared. They gather strength for the coming dawn. We can imagine that Mary’s spontaneous, creative ritual act sets a tone for the rest of the evening. The meal sustains and soothes all of them.*

But this imaginary scene is *not* the one that unfolds. *Instead,* Judas Iscariot interrogates Mary and criticizes her improvised rite. *What a waste. Why now?* The perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor.

Now, some of us will be tempted by Judas and his *calculus* of care. Yes, Judas, we think, why waste expense on rite, on ritual, on celebrating life’s poignant moments, *on pastoral care?*

According to Stephanie Perdew, a United Church of Christ Pastor and Professor, if we follow the computations of Judas, *the balance* is a stingy refusal to celebrate liturgy or life, to mourn, to feel—all the while giving generously (or guiltily, or self-righteously but begrudgingly) to the poor.

But our improvised rites, our outpourings of celebration, our vulnerable giving and receiving of love, and our sustained care for the poor *are not columns that cancel each other out in God's accounting*. In God’s economy *comfort* is always on offer. *Love* and *grace* are free. The Son of Man comes eating and drinking, healing, and multiplying the loaves for the hungry and poor.

And so, *Mary makes her calculation accordingly.* She lavishes love and grace on Jesus when she has the chance.

Thankfully, Jesus has Judas’s number and calls his bluff. Jesus commends Mary’s spontaneous love, ritualized, and embodied and enacted *now.* It is *not* profligate but prophetic. *Mary has learned from sitting at his feet and listening to his teaching that God spares nothing in loving us and asks us to spare nothing in loving each other.* Jesus himself accepts and appreciates Mary’s rite of care and compassion. The act exceeds words, as good rituals do.

Here is a story about a congregation that renewed itself by practicing this kind of extravagant love—a ministry of hospitality—as told by United Church of Christ Pastor and Writer, Lillian Daniel: She said:

*“Built for a time when ladies had time for elegant teas, our church, like many New England Congregational churches, had an old-fashioned ladies parlor that we seldom used. Grand in proportion and furnished with oriental antiques in need of repair, too big for our average events, the parlor was dusty, tattered and seldom used. It wasn’t long before Tim, (a talented church member) who had taught himself how to upholster, had befriended a long-term member who could hang wallpaper. Between the two of them they used money raised by a series of elegant dinners to renovate the ladies parlor. It ended up looking a lot like … Tim’s living room, with handmaid silk Roman shades, pink Victorian wallpaper full of exotic birds and flowers, and velvet love seats.*

*Some people were shocked to see such an extravagant room and more shocked to see how we came to use it. After all the work the men had put in, we couldn’t continue to call it the ladies parlor, especially when we wanted it to be used often and by everybody. So gradually it came to be called the upstairs parlor.*

She continued: “*The congregation came to be known for our lavish teas after church, when we pulled out all the good china. The older members taught the newer members how to make those tiny cucumber tea sandwiches from another era. Sometimes as a congregation we wondered if the frilly fun of silver teas might seem self-indulgent to an outsider. But it felt like ministry to us. We knew, for instance, that the parlor was restored not just for our pleasure but also to host the nursing mothers’ group, the environmental activists, the labor unions, the teenagers, and the social workers who meet there for retreat. When people find out they will be meeting in the upstairs parlor, generally they take in their breath. ‘Surely this room isn’t for us?’ they ask. But it really is. And the ornate wallpaper takes in the shouting of union stewards, the tears of a woman with postpartum depression, the strategizing of community mediators. A few antique chairs get nicked along the way.”*

Said Daniel: *“I recall the scripture in which the disciple who will become the betrayer, Judas, castigates Jesus for allowing Mary to perfume his feet when there were poor people to be fed, and Jesus’ angry response. “The poor you will always have with you,” he said. But Jesus would be there only for a little while. And Judas, who had lost his sense of extravagant beauty, would soon lose his sense and his life.”*

*“We’re not Jesus,”* said Daniel, *“but like him, we are here on earth only for a little while. And so we long for a life lived richly and deeply. We know there is something wrong with the patterns of a world in which people starve while others live in absurd wealth. We know there is something wrong when homeless people die of exposure after funding for their shelter is cut. We know there is something wrong when so many families are too poor to be able to serve their kids breakfast, so it becomes a part of every child’s New Haven public school day, leaving even less time for learning. There is so much wrong in the world that Christians must attend to. It can feel overwhelming to turn to the practice of hospitality in a broken and inhospitable world.”*

“Yet,” she concluded, *“we found that the hospitality of a silver tea offers both pleasant comfort and prophetic correction. At the teas I looked around to see people who do not have this elegance at home enjoy it with others. I saw people who have no china of their own get to own the china of the church. People whose usual lunch is a yogurt slurped down while they stand in front of the refrigerator got to sit down instead in the parlor before a lovely plate full of treats and gaze upon floral arrangements that seem too grand for any one house but are fitting for the whole people of God. There, in the church’s shared finery, we could dream of a day when the beautiful things in life would all be shared.”*

Friends, here is the big takeaway for today:

When God gives, *there is never a waste.*

So, as the gospel teaches:

break open the good wine tonight. Have a pop-up dinner party. Invite a hurting friend. Touch the friend who is ill or afraid. Cradle the child. Spare no expense on the healing balm. Don’t waste one drop or one moment. Jesus celebrates Mary’s lavish rite of spontaneous love.

*Together* they invite us to celebrate our rites of spontaneous love *right now.*