

A Sermon for DaySpring  
 By Eric Howell  
*Pouring Out*  
 John 12:1-8; Philippians 3:4-14  
 April 6, 2025

In our readings this morning, St. Paul and Mary--the sister of Martha and Lazarus, each pour out something of tremendous value. For Mary, it was expensive perfume, and her dignity at the feet of Jesus. For Paul, it was his confidence in his achievements, and his whole life for the call of God in Christ Jesus.

These are amazing but not unusual stories. Read through the Bible just about anywhere, and you'll find a story of a faith hero who poured out something significant for God willingly and out of love. It can be a little intimidating. Those people are larger than life: Moses leaves luxury for solidarity with the suffering, David refuses to take King Saul's life though his own was in danger; Deborah led with uncommon courage; Mary, the mother of Jesus, loses her son; Stephen, the martyr, loses his life. We're glad for inspirational stories, though they can seem distant from our lives about which there is usually little that resembles larger-than-life heroism. Most days we're just doing well to just get to tonight. Changing the world can wait until tomorrow, and it can wait for someone else.

A faithful life is usually less about the dramatic moments than it's sometimes made out to be and its more about the day-to-day than sometimes it's made out to be. Yet, we have to be careful about thinking small. If we're not careful, a small and limited, tight-fisted spirit can slither in. It comes with a slippery question, "What is the least that I can put into this and get out of it ok?" It's not a question that often rises to the consciousness or to lips in polite company, much less pious company, but it's one that still hangs around in the corners: "What is the least I can do here?"

Man on the street walks up to you outside the restaurant. . . "Can you help me out?"  
 "What is the least I can do to get out of this situation?"

Church building campaign gets going; it's time to raise some money.  
 "What is the least I can do to still be supportive?"

Time for volunteers, at the PTA, at the church, or anywhere else:  
 "What is the least I can do to fulfill my obligations?"

Parenting when you're frustrated...  
 washing dishes when you're tired...  
 being kind when you're hurt....

A certain kind of spiritual rut takes shape. "What is the least amount of energy I can give to meet the minimum expectations?"

To be sure, there's a certain logic to it. Sometimes the minimum itself is a stretch. Life pulls us so many directions there comes a calculation about how much to give to one thing to keep everything else going from morning to night, from one paycheck to the next owed bill, from one moment of breathing space to the next deadline. I remember after school jumping out of the car in the driveway to go inside, looking back at mom just sitting in the car, in the sunlight, hands still grasping the wheel. I knock on the window, "Mom, you ok, come on inside," (unsaid: and make me a snack). She'd wave us off, eyes closed. "You two go on in, I'm just going to sit here a while in the sun and silence." Weird, right? That made no sense to me. Does now.

There is a consistency that depends on steadied, measured attention to our affections and desires, even when those affections and desires are really, really good things. Daily we run headlong into the question inherent to human finitude: "What can I do here with limited resources?" A fair question, and of a different order than "What's the least I can do?"

An overwhelming response from those who were in the presence of Jesus, was that limitations and reluctances were very real things, but in the presence of Jesus, they were just shattered. Mary's perfume was wildly expensive, but not worth saving a day longer than this day for the purpose of blessing Jesus with his death imminent. Paul's life was resoundingly successful but was forgettable, he thought, compared to knowing Christ.

Mary pours out perfume on the feet of Jesus. All four gospel writers tell this story in one way or another, recollecting in some detail the jar of perfume--how expensive it was, how extravagant, how lavish this act, lavish and questionable. Who just pours out expensive perfume like this? You dab perfume, right? You use it sparingly; you save as much of it as you can. What is the least amount of this I can use to get the benefit without wasting it? But that wasn't *her* question on that day. So take what you rely on, your prize resource, that which you cling to, and hold it in your hands, and then break it open and anoint Jesus with it. Like bread at the altar, break it open. With Mary, empty it and anoint Jesus' feet.

Paul's life poured out is the word picture of perfume spilled out on Jesus' feet. Recite all the things about your life that any enneagram 3 would find admirable and valuable. Hold it up there in the light—all the accomplishments, the victories, the things you're proud of—take them all and pour them out as anointing over Jesus' feet, like oil running down his head, down his beard, down the robe to the hem of his robe. Pour them out like wine at the altar: "For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him." "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead." Like bread broken, like wine poured are the lives of those who risk something big for something good.

In the face of sacred limitations and nefarious reluctances, the good news is that there's something worth giving your wildly precious life to... someone worthy of

your whole life—your days and your dollars, your sweat and your tears, your heart and your mind and your soul, your play and your work. Not everything is--though many shiny things and loud things claim to be. But Jesus is. Mary grasps this with her whole being, her precious treasure poured out, her hair loose, hanging over her face, his feet, soon to be pierced, cradled in her hands. Paul sees this as he looks back over a life he left behind to follow Jesus and end up in prison. Jesus is worthy of all I am, all I have. I gladly surrender all. The emphasis isn't on *all*. It's on *gladly*. There are other pursuits, there are other demands, there are other paths and temptations, but he alone is worthy. That changes everything.

Goodness knows in the ears of the exhausted, the call to "give it all to Jesus" can sound like moralistic, guilt-inducing, heavy-laden piety. But what if instead it is invitation to lose ourselves and then finally find ourselves? If Paul's words and Mary's act demonstrate anything about the character of Christian living, giving it all is giving out of joy where there's no calculations; just love. Christians can be, and often are, inspired by an inner joy that inspires self-giving love for something that they could get away with doing a whole lot less if they wanted.

Sunday School teacher sits up on Saturday night trying to get her lesson just right. She really believes that the children the next morning may have their lives changed by this lesson, and she wants to reach their hearts and minds with Goldfish and felt boards and the Gospel story. She's not asking what is the least, but what can I do and how can I do it to share the good news with these kids? She loves it.

A family is grieving the loss of a loved one. They are torn apart. Their friends show up with the sacrament of casseroles and encouragement and prayer. They stay. They aren't asking what is the least, but what can I do to shoulder the pain of my friends?

We can think of many examples of people in our lives who went the distance, and it made all the difference. Saints, martyrs, teachers, and neighbors---and even strangers. There was once a Samaritan, you might recall... They are the people whose witness to the gospel helps us love Jesus. We are living in times that may demand more from any of us, in ways we never imagined. Demand peacemaking... hope...patience...truth-telling...humility... sacrifice. These Lenten days are not just dates on a liturgical calendar shaded purple. And love and joy and open-handed gladness may be what saves your life.

The scandal of the gospel still rings true: if you hoard your life you lose it, but if you lose your life for my sake and the gospel's, you save it. How can this be? This giving out of love and joy is taking place all around us: college professors grinding to help their students love a truth that can anchor their lives; food kitchen servers working through arthritic hands to spoon love-made-delicious onto plates that might otherwise be empty and into bellies that might be, too; Daddies and Mommies on their knees, praying for their babies--even their big babies.

In this final stretch of Lent, and of Jesus' life, the cross looms. Its shadow lies across the landscape of the liturgy and also of our lives. And of all the notes of Isaac Watt's hymn:

*Were the whole realm of nature mine  
that were an offering far too small.  
Love so amazing, so divine,  
demands my soul, my life, my all.*

What to leave behind? What do take up? What to break and pour out? ...to forgive? ...to reconcile? ...to give, work, pray, love, to carry another? ...to let our lives be broken open and poured out lavishly in love for God in Jesus Christ?

Your soul, your life, your all is the perfume filling the room of Christ's final days. It is the incense that is the prayer of the saints in the heavenly throne room. It is the bread and wine of the body of Christ—the gifts of the earth and our labor, given in gratitude to God, shared with all who hunger and thirst. It is the knee bending at the name of the one who poured out his life, lowered himself to death, even to death on a cross.

He is worthy of our soul, our life, our all in all. Amen.

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