

Gratitude and Greed

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Jn. 12:1-8

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True character reveals in times of stress.
At moments of high risk and serious danger the true person emerges.
Perhaps for this reason many avoid risk and responsibility
because the persona projected hides the real self at heart.
The gospel reading takes place the last days of Jesus.
Jesus intentionally went to Jerusalem
and all knew this was serious, dangerous business.
Stress was high.
There was great risk and certain peril.
Hearts were revealed.
Mary's heart—and Judas'—were revealed.

Jesus walked from Ephraim to Bethany,
a day's journey, but a long day.
It's not like now when we have lightweight walking shoes and smooth roads.
The roads for Jesus jutted ankle-twisting rocks,
dusty, hot and no occasional cool Caribou in which to rest.
He arrived a Lazarus' house, brother of Martha and Mary.
It seems these three were like *family* to Jesus.
They were close.
Not long before, Lazarus died and "Jesus wept."¹
They were like brothers.
Jesus had a family. Jesus belonged. And his brother died.
But we know death does not have the final say.
Worldly powers wield the threat of death to make us fear,
but we know better
and know death to be a shadow.
Jesus called him out and Lazarus rose and lived.²

But resurrection is *dangerous*.
Resurrection saps the power of those who dominate.
Powers and principalities that control and demand
are weakened without the threat of death.
Their *only* power is intimidation and violence,
and Lazarus is *living proof* of death's shallow threat.
Resurrection is *dangerous* because it exposes the weakness of so-called powers.
We read a few verses later in the Gospel of John,
"So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus also to death..."³
Lazarus living exposes the sham of entrenched power.

The home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary is filled with love
and anchored in the power of kindness for overcoming fear.
Kindness, gentleness, compassion, life
threaten those whose only power is fear.
And those who want to dominate and intimidate *will lash out* at kindness.
Gentleness is not for the faint of heart!

¹ John 11:35.

² John 11:38-44.

³ John 12:10.

Jesus drew near to Jerusalem and his last days.
 Just outside, in the suburb of Bethany,
 Jesus stayed with his good friends, Lazarus, Martha and Mary.
 They had a dinner party in his honor.
 It was poignant time,
 the kind of time you treasure knowing there may be no more.
 Mary removed his sandals and washed the dust from his feet.
 Then she took *a whole pound* of nard,
 a full pint of costly perfume,
 imported from India, fragrant and calming,
 and poured it on his feet,
 working into callouses,
 massaging sore muscles,
 drawing her hair between his toes.

It was pure delight,
 sensual and soothing.

The scene is almost seductive, recalling Song of Solomon,
*Eat, friends, drink, and be drunk with love.*⁴

Physical pleasure is a gift of God.
 The biblical book, Song of Solomon, celebrates *sensuality*,
 not that kind of demeaning sexuality of our current times,
 but *sensuality* that delights in our bodies.

Again from the Song of Solomon,
How sweet is your love, my sister, my bride!
 how much better is your love than wine,
 and the fragrance of your oils than any spice!
Your lips distill nectar... the scent of your garments is like the scent of Lebanon...
Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates with all choicest fruits,
 henna with nard, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon,
 with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, with all chief spices—
*a garden fountain, a well of living water, and flowing streams from Lebanon.*⁵

Jesus rests and welcomes the pleasure.

Judas is right, the nard is costly, worth a year's wages
 and Mary *pours* it out on Jesus.
 She could have given Jesus *a token gift*,
 a little something to show she cared,
 a trifle that represents something more.
But is "a little something" the same as extravagant gift?
 Mary was given back her brother when Lazarus was raised.
 Mary and Martha were given back their life,
 their future in a society that depended on men for income and safety.
 To Mary, Jesus was brother and family and savior.
 Outpouring gratitude and love, overflowing her heart,
 wanting to express the depth of her love for Jesus,
 Mary gave this costly gift and did this lovely thing.

Gratitude.

Every day gratefulness for life and being
 is *the key to happiness*.
 It does not matter the amount of wealth or charmed circumstances.
 Comfortable and carefree or hard and stricken,
 those who wake up every day *grateful* are the ones who know happiness.

⁴ Song of Solomon 5:1.

⁵ Song of Solomon 4:10-15.

Gratitude has to be expressed.
Giving is the expression of gratitude.
 Gratitude has to come out,
 is the Holy Spirit bursting forth and appearing as giving.
 Out of profound gratitude for Jesus,
 Mary *gives* pleasurable rest.

Judas doesn't get it.
 Judas is neither grateful nor generous.
 Because he is not grateful he cannot be generous.
 Gratitude is expressed in a couple of ways.
 There is being generous with *stuff*, giving a present,
 and there is being generous with *words*,
 recognizing, complimenting, thanking.
 Judas is not capable of compliments.
 He is not grateful and thus cannot say kind words to another.
 Instead he criticizes, questions judgment, disapproves.
 "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii
 and the money given to the poor?"
 Not question but accusation,
 words of a greedy, shriveled heart.
 Judas did not care for the poor; he was greedy.⁶
 He thought only of himself.
 Judas was a thief, an embezzler.
 He weaseled himself into being the group's treasurer so as to steal.
 Jesus and the disciples pooled their money and shared expenses.
 Except Judas dipped his hands into the coffers,
 a little here, a little there.
 For his extra responsibility he felt *entitled* to a little more.
 Not a generous heart,
 but one unsatisfied and selfish.

Jesus responds by alluding to the Old Testament Law, Deuteronomy 15.
 Jesus calls Judas out,
 calls out his greed and selfish soul.
 Deuteronomy 15, verses 7-11,
 If there is among you a poor person...,
 do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor.
 You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need,
 whatever it may be.
 Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought...
 Give liberally and be ungrudging...
 Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth,
 I therefore command you,
 "Open wide your hand to the poor and needy in your land."
 God's law in Deuteronomy, "Give liberally and be ungrudging."
 The Lord commands this to achieve *justice*,
 but also commands this to give *joy*.
Happiness comes out of generous deeds of gratitude.
 Jesus compassionately offers the gift of happiness to Judas.
 Giving is the way to happiness.
 Judas, it seems, preferred to hold a grudge.
Giving liberally and ungrudgingly is the key to happiness.

⁶ John 12:6.

In the past few years there has been proliferation of scientific research
 into what makes for happy, content, good people.
 Case Western University Medical School in Cleveland, Ohio
 is one of the schools of medical research
 studying the physical, psychological and social effects of loving kindness.⁷
 Recent scientific studies support what Christians have known for centuries.
Giving is fundamental to happiness.
 Case Western University found that,
*Giving in high school predicts good physical and mental health
 all the way into late adulthood...*
Giving reduces mortality...
Giving reduces adolescent depression and suicide risk.
Helping ... reduces mortality...
Even the simple act of praying for others...
*reduces the harmful impact of health difficulties...*⁸
 Medical research supports what Christians have known all along,
giving, a generous heart,
 is the key to happiness,
 is the key to stable, nurturing society,
 is the key to contentment and peace,
 is the key to longevity, health and full life.

Giving is the expression of gratitude,
 the outpouring of a grateful heart.
 Mary pours out perfume
 as she pours out her gratitude for Jesus.
 Gift, gratitude, giving
 reflects the God of scriptures who himself gives throughout history.
 Giving reflects God.
 Giving is the Holy Spirit itself pouring out from us.
 Giving is fundamental to happiness,
 and faithful response to a giving God.
 Giving out of gratitude is the key to happiness.

What is the character of *your* heart?
 Are you happy?
 How generous can you be
 in kind words,
 in thoughts about others,
 in sharing your money?
 How *happy* do you dare to be?
 Amen.

⁷ Stephen Post and Jill Niemark, *Why Good Things Happen to Good People* (Broadway, 2007). See the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love, <http://www.unlimitedloveinstitute.org/>.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.8-10.