## Extravagant Love and the Cost of Discipleship

Today's Gospel shares the story of a profound act of devotion. Mary, the sister of Lazarus, anoints Jesus' feet with costly perfume and wipes them with her hair. This is not a practical act—it is an act of extravagant love. In a world that measures worth by utility, Mary's action defies conventional wisdom.

Judas protests, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" The Gospel exposes his hypocrisy—his concern is not for the poor but for himself. Jesus, however, receives Mary's offering as an act of pure love, one that anticipates his own self-giving on the cross.

Mary's act questions each of us: What does it mean to love without reservation? The way of Jesus is one of costly love—of surrendering self-interest for the sake of God's mission.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." Authentic discipleship demands commitment—a willingness to risk comfort, security, and reputation for the sake of love.

Judas' protest prompts Jesus' famous response: "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." This passage has often been misused as an excuse, or justification for inaction. Yet Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 15:11: "There will always be poor in the land. Therefore, be openhanded toward your brothers and sisters who are poor and needy."

Jesus is not dismissing the poor—he is calling us to persistent, never-ending generosity. The presence of poverty is not a justification for withholding love but an invitation to a committed lifelong outpouring of love, relationship, service. Mary's extravagant love is not in opposition to justice—it reveals its foundation: love fuels action. Worship and justice are intertwined.

Bonhoeffer puts it plainly: "The Church is the Church only when it exists for others… not dominating or directing but helping and serving." If the poor are always with us, then our discipleship is always marked by love in action. In logic, we call this an axiom. QED *quod erat demonstrandum*

Paul's letter to the Philippians echoes this relentless passion—a longing to know Christ inside and out, to be shaped by both his suffering and his resurrection.

Paul does not seek an abstract faith or a comfortable belief system, but a life fully immersed in Jesus' death and rising—a discipleship that costs everything yet leads to authentic life.

Paul is aware that he has not yet arrived. He makes no claim to perfection. Still, he presses forward, straining toward full communion with Christ. His past—whether marked by failure or success—no longer defines him. What matters is the path ahead, the call of resurrection. Nothing will stand in his way, because Christ has already taken hold of him.

This is the urgency of discipleship—not passive waiting, but charging forward, a life poured out pursuing the Way of Love. To be sure, it is not easy. It means surrender, suffering, sacrifice. Yet to know Jesus, to be gripped by his love, to press into the fullness of resurrection life—this is the commitment to the way of love.

Paul invites us to step into this calling: to leave behind what holds us back, to put everything on the line, and to run with all that we are toward the life found in Christ alone. Isaiah assures us that God is about to do a new thing.

The language of discipleship can sometimes feel heavy, even alienating. It carries echoes of rigid obedience or exclusionary religion. Many resist it because they have seen it used to demand unquestioning loyalty rather than deepen love, to segregate rather than integrate.

I don't share much about my family of origin, let's say it was very dysfunctional. Thankfully I had loving wonderful grandparents. My father's sister and her husband, my aunt and uncle, were saved at a Billy Graham event in the early 50's. They became very fundamental charismatic Baptists....so much so that my grandparents had to hide the Irish Whiskey under the sink.

My aunt and uncle never knew that my older cousin is gay, he would not risk their anger, and lives today with his lifelong partner. They never knew the secret truth that he and I shared. They never knew that my grandmother on her death bed made me promise to stay close and protect him.

They attempted to convert me when I was a younger teenager when I came to visit.... declaring that my infant baptism was not valid, that I needed to be born again, and multiple times attempted to coerce me into an altar call. They dismissed the Episcopal Tradition, scolded me for believing in Darwinism, the list goes on.

In reading Brad Onishi's book, Preparing for War, the extremist history of white Christian Nationalism I was reminded of my aunt and uncle...

*"to be a good disciple was to follow commands without hesitation—moral nuance, historical context, and empathy were threats to truth." "Fundamentalist discipleship doesn't just tell you what to believe—it tells you who you are, who your enemies are, and what you should fear."*

To be sure, I resisted.

I resisted so much that it was not until I reached about 50 that I would read anything that smelled of evangelical.... I learned from a chance meeting with Jim Wallis and later a meal with Brian McLarin that there were progressive Christian evangelicals. It also took me a long time to understand deeply what it meant to be a disciple; I had so much understood discipleship only in the context of my aunt and uncle.

Jesus never coerced his followers—he invited them: "Come, follow me." In an age when coercion has driven many from the church, we must rediscover the power of invitation.

We might call discipleship Spiritual Formation, recognizing that faith is not static but a lifelong journey of being shaped by grace. The Episcopal Church has long taught that we do not follow Jesus alone—we are formed by community, by liturgy, by sacrament, by the living Word taking root in our lives.

For some, Baptismal Living captures it best. The promises made on our behalf at baptism—and confirmed in our maturity, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to strive for justice and peace, to respect the dignity of every human being—are not abstract ideals but the concrete expressions and core values of what it means to live as people of the cross and resurrection.

At its core, I learned, and I suggest, discipleship is simply walking in the way of Jesus, letting love, justice, and mercy shape our lives. We might find meaning in The Jesus Movement, The Way of Love a term championed by Presiding Bishop Michael Curry.

He reminds us that following Christ is not about institutional maintenance but about joining God's work of love, liberation, resistance, and reconciliation in the world.

In a time when faith is so often co-opted by empire, we might reclaim it as Faithful Resistance. To follow Jesus is to resist the forces of greed, violence, and indifference. It is to stand against the powers that dehumanize and divide. It is to proclaim, with our lives, that love is stronger than fear, that justice is possible, to experience joy in our relationships with others in a beloved community and that God's dream for the world is not yet finished.

Lent is not merely a season of reflection but a call to recommit—to live into costly grace, to let Christ's love take hold of us and reshape our lives. Lent is a season of surrender: letting go of what holds us back and stepping fully into discipleship. We are like Mary, called to pour ourselves out in love.

Bonhoeffer warns: "Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate." Lent calls us into costly grace—the grace that transforms. True discipleship is not just intellectual assent, but our lives transformed, reshaped by Christ's love.

Discipleship is a journey, not a rigid set of rules. Doubt, struggle, joy, anger, fear, and growth are part of the path.

It is rooted in love—not fear or obligation. Following Jesus leads to deeper relationships, justice, and wholeness.

Grounded in love, we stand up for liberation and justice, offer radical hospitality, and assist in heal broken communities.

In the wilderness of our world—of injustice, division, and despair—God is there. God is making a way. The rivers of grace are flowing, the path of love is being laid before us. We are called to perceive it, to step into it, to become part of this new creation. The Way of Love is not just about what we do—it is about who we are becoming.

Let us follow Mary's example: love extravagantly.

Let us heed Jesus' call: serve the poor, those afflicted by empire, with hearts full of grace.

Let us join Paul in pressing forward, shedding what holds us back.

Let us embrace Isaiah's vision, trusting that God is always at work, making a new way where we least expect it.

Even in a world of injustice, division, and despair, Jesus is there, inviting and waiting for us with arms outstretched.

*"It is entering into the reality of a child, of the poor, of those wearing rags, of the sick, of a hovel, of a shack. It is going to share with them. And from the very heart of misery, of this situation, to transcend it, to elevate it, to promote it, and to say to them, "You aren't trash. You aren't marginalized." It is to say exactly the opposite: "You are valuable.""* *Romero*

Will we step into the path of transformation as disciples of Jesus?

Isaiah prophesizes: "Do not remember the former things… I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" God is always moving forward, breaking into the present, calling us to follow.

May we walk in love—the Way of Jesus—with courage and joy.

Amen.