

The Risk of Faith

John 12:1-8

5th Sunday in Lent

Ordination to Eldership

21st March 2010

There was an amazing story in the papers back in February that seemed to get lost amidst all the hoopla of the Olympic Games. It was about a discovery recently been made in Antarctica. Seemingly, a team of New Zealand scientists recovered 5 crates of 100 year old Mackinlay's Scotch whisky from the ice below a hut once used by the famous polar explorer, Ernest Shackleton. Although some of the bottles had unfortunately cracked because of the ice, the team reported that many remained intact and might possibly still be in a state they can be consumed.¹

Now, I wonder what price that Scotch might command if it was sold on the open market. I'm sure it would fetch a pretty price. Just a few years back, an unnamed businessman paid over \$58,000 for a bottle of Dalmore 62, a blend of whiskies dating back to the 19th & 20th century, which he shared with five friends in a hotel room outside London, England. At the time, that was thought to be the most expensive whisky in the world. But the Shackleton whisky might just top that.²

Even though that Scotch is so very costly, it is by no means the most expensive liquid in the world. One of the contenders for that title is the ink used in computer printers. 13 ml, the standard quantity sold in cartridges, costs around about \$20 which makes it around \$3000 a litre or \$8000 per gallon. One technology writer recently estimated that filling an Olympic swimming pool with printer ink at standard retail prices would cost a cool \$6.5 billion!³

Probably, though, the most expensive liquid of all has to be perfume. One might pay around \$70-100 for 50 ml of a quality perfume or \$2000 a litre which is not quite as expensive as printer ink. However the more exclusive fragrances are much more costly. A half-litre bottle of Clive Christian special edition perfume, for instance, retails for a mere \$256,000. Of course, if you subtract the cost of the 5-carat diamond embedded in the stopper, the 18-carat gold inlay and the Czech crystal decanter, you end up paying a little less. But, then again, I know how demanding most of you are where your

perfumes are concerned and if you didn't get some precious stones thrown in with the bottle you would be mightily upset. And that goes for you too, ladies!⁴

Now, if there is one thing that has not changed between biblical times and the present, it is the high cost of perfume. Says one writer, "Spikenard was the favourite perfume of antiquity. It got its name from the spike-like shape of the root and spiny stem of the herb plant that was found high up in the Himalayan Mountains. The Greeks and Romans loved the smell of this rare unguent (perfume and ointment were virtually indistinguishable) so much that they willingly paid the expense of having nard shipped long distances. The best spikenard was imported from India in sealed alabaster boxes, opened only on very special occasions. The cost of the perfume was 300 denarii – in today's money, almost \$30,000."⁵

Of course, it was this very expense that upset so many of the people when Mary anointed Jesus at Bethany. As you remember, just before Passover, Jesus was enjoying the company of his friends, Martha and Mary and their recently returned-from-the-dead brother, Lazarus. After Martha put on a sumptuous feast, Mary suddenly and spontaneously brought out a jar of the most expensive perfume and proceeded to pour it over Jesus' feet, wiping them with her long, unbound hair. And, as she did so, the sweet smell of this expensive perfume spread outwards from the jar and filled the whole house.

Why did Mary do this? Maybe it was a sign of gratitude for Jesus saving her brother, Lazarus. Maybe it was an act of consecration as Jesus set off on his dangerous mission to Jerusalem. Maybe it was a symbol of anointment, foreshadowing Christ's coming death on the Cross. Whatever the case, Judas was furious. "Could this perfume not have been sold for 300 silver coins and the money given to the poor?" he jibed. "Here in Galilee we have all this abject poverty around us and you go and throw all your money away in this exercise of over-indulgence. What a waste! Shame on you, Mary!"

Strangely enough, Jesus did not join the howls of protest from Judas and the others but defended and even commended Mary. He recognised the true meaning of what she had done. That she intuitively realised – in a way the disciples had failed to do – that he, Jesus, was the Messiah, the Son of God. And also, by anointing him with this perfume, she, at a time when the disciples were in denial, perceived the true meaning of his forthcoming death. Most of all, Jesus recognised that Mary had done what writer, Bill Versteeg, calls an IATD – an Intentional Act of True Devotion.⁶

There are those who have also put forward the possibility that Jesus had reason to be even more grateful to Mary afterwards during the hours of his suffering and crucifixion. The fragrance of the perfume splashed on his body that day, they say, stayed with him and reminded him of Mary's loyalty and belief in him at a time when the disciples fled for fear. We all know how powerful our sense of smell is in evoking memories. The smell of a barbecue, for instance, brings back happy summer memories. The smell of talcum powder is a beautiful reminder of the times when our children were babies. The smell of orange blossoms recalls times spent on vacation in Florida. Maybe, for Jesus, the smell of that perfume still on his skin – even as he suffered and died – was a powerful reminder, sustaining him with thoughts of the loyalty and faith of Mary at Bethany.⁷

Now, there are one or two aspects of this story that serve as a challenge to us today in the church of our times – especially for those of us called to leadership among God's people.

For instance, this story challenges us to practise an extravagant faith, like Mary's, where prudence and practicality are abandoned in the cause of love, devotion and service.

The Rev. Barbara Brokoff tells of a church that had undertaken an ambitious construction project to enlarge their sanctuary. But the funds were not coming in as planned. One of the elderly women in the parish stopped by the minister's study one day. "I have a gift," she said, and rather timidly extended to her surprised pastor her wedding ring. "It is very valuable. Sell it, and give the money to the church building fund." Gaining control of himself, the pastor said to her, "It's true we are not having an easy time completing this building, but we cannot

accept your wedding ring. We'll manage somehow without a sacrifice like this!" "Oh, you don't understand," was her reply. "My husband has gone on to heaven. We are expanding our church plant here on earth to prepare people for eternity. I would not feel right unless I could give that which is the most precious thing I own!"⁸

Now, I am not advocating that people give their wedding rings to the church. But maybe this is an aspect of discipleship with which we 21st century Christians need to take more seriously. That the call to faith is not a call to a parsimonious, penny-pinching kind of faith. It is not a call to the kind of approach Judas and some of the other disciples employed where everything was judged in financial terms, on the basis of cost-effectiveness always keeping an eye on the bottom line. No, we are called to an extravagant kind of faith, an overly-generous faith, an overly-grateful faith, an overly-gracious faith that is constantly willing to "go the second mile". We are called to do, not just the minimum to get by, but to do more than is required – and then some. This is the kind of faith Jesus demands of us – and we who are leaders in the church are called not only to practise it but also to inspire it in others.

Because the kind of faith Mary exemplified that day in Bethany was an extravagant faith, it was obviously faith that had a large element of risk attached to it. She had no guarantee of the outcome of her actions in anointing Jesus. But she was willing to risk her reputation, to risk criticism, to risk ridicule to do what she believed to be right for the cause of one she loved so greatly.

How difficult it is for us today even to consider doing something of the same order as Mary. To risk all for our faith. To reach out, for instance, into uncharted areas. Seeking to serve the needy of our community in even greater ways. Working to attract seekers of spirituality to join our number. Becoming more inclusive of those who may not fit the traditional Presbyterian mould.

Of course, the challenge of taking such risks of faith is a tall order – especially for those who carry the responsibilities of the eldership and are called to give leadership in the matter of giving the church a cutting edge in these early years of the 21st century. But let's not forget that when we risk everything and boldly rise to the challenge with which Jesus presents us, then he

richly rewards our faith.

Back in the 1930s, the Rev. Dr. George MacLeod undertook a great venture which he hoped would bring renewal to the Church of Scotland. He wanted to re-build the ancient 6th century Abbey on the historic island of Iona, to the west of Scotland, and then train ministers and lay-people there for Christian service. Along with a band of ministers and tradesmen, he embarked on the building project without having all the necessary funding in place, believing God would somehow provide what was needed. They managed to raise a certain amount of money but not enough to buy wooden supports to restore the roof. Almost at their wit's end, thinking they might have to give up, they could do nothing but wait in faith. And then, one night in a tremendous storm, a large cargo ship loaded with lumber from British Columbia, foundered on the coast of the nearby Island of Mull and, well, the rest is history ... The roof of Iona Abbey to this day is Canadian through and through and the Iona Community has gone on to inspire the church internationally. This huge leap of faith in undertaking a great work of restoration and renewal was richly rewarded.⁹

Do we today have a courage similar to George MacLeod to step into the unknown? Do we have the courage, like Mary, to risk all for our faith? If we want to have a vital and vibrant church able to meet the challenges of the 21st century, we certainly will need it.

Of course, it's tough have to have this kind of courage. It's tough to practise this kind of faith. But we can be sure that, as we look to God, he will supply all our needs. He will give us all the courage and all the faith we need, and more. In our every effort to renew our church and extend God's kingdom today, let us never forget one great truth – that the power behind us is always greater than the challenge ahead of us.

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⁵ Leonard Sweet, "Can You Smell The Perfume", www.eSermons.com

⁶ John 12:1-8

⁷ Leonard Sweet, Op. Cit.

⁸ Barbara Brokhoff, "Defended By The Divine", www.eSermons.com

⁹ Ron Ferguson, *George MacLeod: Founder of the Iona Community*, (HarperCollins, Glasgow 1990), p.183 "In September 1940, when the incendiary bombs were raining on London, it looked as if the rebuilding might have to be stopped because of a lack of timber. Then the deck cargo of a Swedish ship, carrying wood from Canada, had to be jettisoned. The timber floated all the way to Mull, directly opposite Iona - all the right length."

¹ "One Hundred Year Old Scotch Whisky Found in Antarctica", www.biojobblogger.com, February 5, 2010

² "Drinking The Most Expensive Scotch Whisky in the World", Dalmore 62, www.examiner.com, March 19, 2010

³ "Going With The Flow, The Most Expensive Liquids", CBC News, May 14, 2007 <http://www.cbc.ca>

⁴ Ibid.