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# A Criminal Waste

John 12.1-8

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on March 14, 2010 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

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You never regret your extravagances. God is wild and free, and God made us to be as wild and free as he is. Hard as we try, we will never succeed in domesticating God.

Despite being just 5'2", Alison Hargreaves was hailed as one of the finest climbers in the world. When aged 26, she successfully scaled the formidable north face of the Eiger, in Switzerland. Afterwards some criticized her for climbing while six months pregnant with her first child. Her explanation was terse. "I was pregnant, not sick," she replied. Five years on she was the first person to climb, by herself, and in one season, the six north faces of the Alps. Two years later, in 1995, when she was 33, she set out to climb the world's three highest mountains in one summer.

She made history as the first woman, and only the second person ever, to reach the summit of Mount Everest without porters, climbing partners, or supplementary oxygen. Not long after, she conquered Pakistan's fearsome K2. But during the descent from the summit of K2, she and her five companions were lost in a blizzard. They never made it down. When her husband was given the news, he simply said, "I can hear her repeating her favorite saying, 'One day as a tiger is better than a thousand years as a sheep.'"

Alison Hargreaves mixed an incredible will, an astonishing thirst for climbing, a commitment to detail and technique, and a raging passion for the mountains. Now – not all of us are quite like her. For some of us the mere prospect of an overnight camping expedition is enough to send us scurrying for the air conditioning, the dishwashers and the blow dryers that soften our encounter with the great outdoors. But I believe Jesus enjoys the Alison Hargreaves' of this world. And his encounter with Mary of Bethany at the house of Martha and Lazarus tells us why.

Jesus is sitting down to dinner with Lazarus and Martha and a bunch of friends. Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, takes a full pound of exquisite perfume and pours it over Jesus' feet. Now I don't know how many people have found themselves stuck for a Christmas present for a loved one on the day before Christmas Eve. And quite likely you're terrified of going up to a perfume stall because you think they'll offer you a host of products you don't know the names of in sizes you haven't heard of and in shapes of bottles you can't understand. So this is what you do. You treat it like old fashioned vegetable shopping, and say "I'll take a pound of pure nard, please." Right? Wrong. A pound is an *astronomical* amount of perfume.

Our old friend Brother Judas Iscariot happens to be lurking round the back of the party, keeping an eye on the goings-on. Clearly he's got a better sense of the market price of perfume than your average disciple. He takes one look at it and reckons it's worth 300 denarii. Let's do a quick bit of math. A denarius was an average daily wages. If the average household income in North Carolina today is around \$50,000, then we're saying the perfume Mary poured over Jesus' feet that night was worth the equivalent of \$40,000. \$40,000 worth of perfume! I don't care what your bailout package or stimulus plan is for the local ointment trade: that's an unbelievable amount of money.

You've got to have a bit of sympathy for Judas. That's an outrageous sum of money. Feel the eyes of the whole room, first of all. Watch everyone's eyeballs popping out of their head as they see a bottle of perfume with a whole *pound* of scent in it. "Don't drop that! Watch what you're doing with it! Take it easy! Hold on!" There's the sheer mesmeric fascination of seeing \$40,000 of liquid wrapped up in such a fragile container, held by such delicate hands. Where on *earth* did Mary get the money to buy such a massive quantity of perfume? Is this her and her brother and sister's retirement savings, all thrown into one, precarious investment?

And then, what's this? She's kneeling at Jesus' feet. Now you don't know where to look. Women don't touch men in this culture. They certainly don't touch a man's foot, because everyone knows a foot is might just as well

be what we could politely call an upper, inner thigh. This is a disgraceful public performance. And now she's picking up the bottle of perfume, and she's *pouring it all over Jesus' feet*. That's unbelievable! What a terrible waste. Making erotic gestures in front of everybody is one thing – but squandering a huge sum of money is quite another. I can't believe she's just poured \$40,000 all over the floor! And now she's wiping Jesus' feet with her hair! What a performance! She seems to have no shame about the flagrant indecency, no awareness of the public disgrace, and no worries whatsoever about the criminal waste of money.

Judas is indignant. “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” Whatever his personal motives, you miss the force of the story unless you recognize that Judas has a very important point. It's not just that this is a lot of money and it could benefit a lot of people. It's that the Jerusalem temple, as well as being the key place where Jews could find their sins forgiven and be close to God's heart, was also the center of a bureaucracy that managed welfare on behalf of the poor. So Judas isn't just being mean, or greedy. He's saying, “We already *have* a system for managing welfare. And this woman has just driven a coach and horses through it in a disgraceful, profligate, and insulting manner. What on earth does she think she's doing? And what on earth do *you* think you're doing *letting* her?”

Judas offers us the voice of common sense, of decency, of public order. Don't waste precious money and resources. Don't step too close to the boundaries of proper relations between the sexes. Don't bypass the very carefully thought-out systems for providing welfare benefits for the truly poor. Who are we to disagree with Judas? He has all the vocabulary that makes our lives function: stewardship, policies and procedures, by-laws, strategic plans. And yet he can't see the one thing that's staring him in the face. He can't see the one thing that Mary alone *can* see: that Jesus is going to die in a week's time. There may of course be good reasons why Judas isn't prepared to see that. Judas is going to have a big hand in Jesus' entrapment. But the point is, besides Mary, no one else is seeing it either.

And now, finally, we are in a position to make sense of the whole scene. I wonder if you've ever been in a community or in a relationship where everyone else or the one person that mattered is so preoccupied, so taken up with themselves or the usual way of doing things or a bunch of trivial or superficial politenesses, that you felt like taking all your clothes off and screaming at the top of your voice and doing something really crazy to get their attention. That's pretty much what Mary does. And even *when* she does, *still* no one pays the slightest bit of attention. All that happens is that Judas points out that she's totally out of order.

And Jesus says, “But don't you *see*? She's behaving just like me! She's demonstrating the extravagance of human love. She's poured out her whole self – financial, social, emotional – to gain your attention by a gesture of sheer beauty. I'm demonstrating the extravagance of *divine* love. I'm pouring out my whole self, physical, spiritual, metaphysical, to gain your attention by a gesture of sheer beauty. I am the extravagance of God. And if you're taking no notice of *her*, then how much worse that you're taking no notice of *me*.”

Jesus is God flinging off all his clothes and doing the most crazy, wild thing to get us to see what really matters. Jesus is God kicking and screaming to try to stir our attention away from the trivial and greedy distractions that bloat and suffocate our lives. Jesus is God wasting the most precious and beautiful thing he has to show us that he is utterly devoted to us. The life of Jesus is worth a lot more than 300 denarii or \$40,000. And it's a total waste unless... unless it wins us back to God.

And that leaves us with two uncomfortable but very necessary questions. We could call them the Judas question and the Mary question. First, the Judas question. What is the thing you are not able or willing to see? What is God trying to show you? What is someone close to you trying to say to you? I wonder if there's something that somebody is trying to tell you or show you, maybe so desperately that they're starting to do crazy and ridiculous things to get your attention. I wonder if you're so taken up with routines and distractions and defenses that you can't see them or won't hear them. I wonder if somehow all your policies and procedures and plans and programs are, in the end, forms of avoidance of seeing the one thing that matters.

And then, the Mary question. What is the beautiful thing you are being called to do? I wonder if there is something you are drawn to but shy away from because it seems too costly, too extravagant, too crazy, too

ridiculous. I wonder if there is a gesture you need to make because, like Mary's gesture, it's time for you, for once in your life, to imitate the extravagance of God. I wonder if, like Mary, you've suddenly realized that this important thing has to happen right now – and it won't wait.

When other people see your life, what do they see? Do they see a criminal waste? And if they do, is that waste one that mimics Judas' parsimony or Mary's extravagance? Judas, Mary and Jesus all wasted their lives, in different ways. The point is, have you wasted your life in caution, or in love? When people see the waste of your life, does it make them think of Judas, or of Jesus?

Some years ago, when I was a pastor of a little church in England, there was a woman who was in her late fifties and was just for the first time learning to read. She'd grown up in a children's home and the good things in life came late to her. She worked at the local hospital taking meals around the wards on a cart. She was no oil painting but at 40 she married an honest man and her mother-in-law became the mother she'd never had. So her mother-in-law's death was a terrible blow to her. She told me, "Sam, I spoke to my supervisor, and I told her the situation, and I asked her for a couple of weeks' passionate leave."

I looked at her and I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. I said, "*Passionate leave? Really?*" The idea of a couple of weeks' passionate leave with this particular gentle lady was a bit much for my imagination. Of course, she meant to say "*Compassionate leave.*" That's what bereavement leave is called in England. But she was as beautiful and right as Mary – and I was as stupid and wrong as Judas. A couple of weeks' passionate leave was just what she needed, to recognize all that love she'd poured out for the mother she'd never had.

It's two weeks until Easter. It's the time known as *passiontide*. I wonder if it's time you asked for a couple of weeks' passionate leave. A couple of weeks to reflect on the Judas question, "What's the thing I'm desperately trying with all my busyness and politeness and professionalism not to see?" A couple of weeks to reflect on the Mary question, "What's the beautiful thing I'm being called to do – embarrassing, extravagant or crazy as it may be?"

Alison Hargreaves showed us the face of God because she knew her passion, she knew the danger her passion might put her in – but, like a tiger, she let that passion lead her life. That's what God does. I wonder if you have a passion like that. God does. It's you. You are the extravagant passion of God.

You never regret your extravagances. How do I know that? Because God never regrets *his* extravagances. And what is God's extravagance? God's extravagance is you. God's expensive, gorgeous, fragrant, crazy, and ultimately useless and wasteful extravagance – is you. And God never regrets pouring out and wasting everything he is – for you.