



Harvest Time

Christians of wealth engaging with money as a doorway to spiritual transformation.

The Anointing in Bethany: Biblical Economics and Extravagant Love by Rosemary Feerick

I am a wealthy woman. I don't have as much as some, but I know that I have far more than I need. Compared to most human beings on this planet and compared even to most Americans, I am rich.

This fact troubled me for a long time. I read the Gospel. I was aware of the violence of poverty. I heard what Jesus said about money. The verse I heard the loudest was in Mark 10:21 – “Sell what you have, give to the poor, and come and follow me.” For many years that verse echoed inside of me. Reading Mark 10, I understood that following Jesus meant that I had to sell everything I had and give the proceeds to the poor. I wanted to do it. But for all sorts of reasons I could not. For many years, I kneeled next to the rich ruler at the feet of Jesus feeling guilty, frustrated, scared and sad. I was stuck.

Then I met Mary of Bethany.

I was not looking for her. I had not considered the possibility that her story was about money. But one night, as I sat in a community of friends who were wrestling with wealth and Gospel faith, I remembered her. We had been talking about Haiti – the excruciating poverty there and the dangers of confronting structures of evil. Some of us were trying to figure out how to respond with our wealth. Others were angry that we could not “fix” the injustice in Haiti. Faced with the harsh realities of poverty, violence, and our own powerlessness, I found myself on the verge of despair. At that moment, without thinking about it, I turned to a friend, took off his shoes, and began to massage his feet.

I did not intend to imitate Mary. I was just doing what we had done in that community many times before. That group had wisely, though unintentionally, stumbled into a discipline of offering each other foot massages, particularly during moments where we felt stuck.

As a mother, I had long been aware of the mystical quality of touch. In the darkness and silence of my son's room, I often experienced the physical presence of God in my body – in my hands, my eyes, the warmth of my stomach, and my life-giving milk – nourishing and loving my son. But I did not think or talk about it too much. I just received, and offered, the gift.

I had also been aware of the power of the Word to become flesh in and for me on my trips to Haiti and in my work with people who live on the streets of this country. I had been touched by

Christ in what Mother Teresa called the distressing disguise of the poor. And I had felt God using my hands to touch others.

But I did not connect those moments and my questions about money until I found myself doing what Mary had done. As I offered a foot massage in the context of a difficult conversation about money and poverty, I realized that I was participating in the Anointing in Bethany scene (John 12:1-8). Suddenly my eyes were opened, different pieces of my life came together, and I became aware that the Gospel story had found me.

This experience of being found in the story opened my body, heart, and mind allowing me to hear for the first time that what I knew about God's love in my body was what I was being invited to give and receive with my wealth.

A Story about Money

The Anointing in Bethany is a story about money. We don't usually think of it that way. We usually imagine it with its parallels in the synoptic gospels in mind. We remember the sinful woman who touches Jesus' feet in Luke's Gospel (Luke 7:36-50). We think ahead to Jesus' death and understand that Mary is anointing Jesus' body for burial, even though in John's Gospel someone else does that (John 19:39-40). We forget that right in the middle of the story is an exchange about giving to the poor. We don't hear what Jesus says in Matthew and Mark about the woman who anointed him: "Wherever the Gospel is preached in the whole world, her story will be told, in memory of her." (Matthew 26:13; Mark 14:9) We do not realize that the anointing is one of very few stories that appear in all four Gospels.

What if we did remember her whenever we preached the Gospel? What if we lingered in Bethany and savored the fragrance of Mary's extravagant anointing? What if we let that affect the way we hear the Gospel – particularly the most challenging aspects of it? What if we took Mary's example seriously and let it shape the way we work with wealth?

Recently, I have learned to pay close attention to Mary of Bethany. I have learned to recognize Mary as a disciple who offers her wealth to Jesus with extravagant love. I have learned that those of us who want to take Jesus' economic challenges seriously do well to remember her.

Mystical Love and Money

Most of us remember Mary as the sister of Martha and Lazarus. We remember the way she sat at the feet of Jesus, while her sister did the work of setting the table (Luke 10:39-40). We remember the way she wept after her brother died (John 11:33). Perhaps we also recall that she is a woman that Jesus loved (John 11:5). She is the one to whom Martha whispered in secret that Jesus had asked for her (John 11:28).

In John's Gospel, this woman whom Jesus loved is the one who anoints his feet with nard, oil that is mentioned in only one other context in the Bible, the Song of Songs. This detail suggests that Mary's gesture is best understood in the context of the mystical and sensual love of the Song

of Songs. I am not suggesting that Mary and Jesus were actual lovers. There is no evidence for that. But the details of the anointing do suggest that Mary recognizes Jesus as the beloved and responds by opening her heart and hands to him. The Anointing in Bethany, in other words, is a poignant story of Christian devotion, rooted in the mystical love that empowers all it touches to become instruments of that love.

Judas misses the point. He accuses Mary of wasting money that could have been given to the poor. Before dismissing him, it's worth noting that he offers what seems a reasonable objection. Jesus had instructed his followers to turn away from hoarding in order to share with each other and especially with those most in need. Mary has indeed spilled valuable oil that could have been sold and given to the poor.

But Jesus rebukes Judas, telling him to leave Mary alone. He then quotes the first part of Deuteronomy 15:11 "The needy will never be lacking in the land." Jesus' response to Judas is sometimes interpreted as Jesus' resigned acceptance of poverty. But this reasoning makes no sense in light of Jesus' ministry of responding to the suffering of the poor and his practice of challenging structures of injustice. Jesus is not arguing as some of us might, that if we cannot solve the problem of poverty, we should not respond. Instead, he is offering a way of understanding how to ground our hope in the face of the poverty that does not go away.

In order to understand what Jesus is saying, we have to remember the second part of that verse from Deuteronomy – "that is why I command you to open your hand to your poor and needy kinsman in your country." While Jesus speaks, Mary's hands are open to him. Mary's gesture provides an important clue into what it means to respond to poverty.

Unlike Judas, whose narrow focus on transferring money fails to challenge the objectification of the poor, Mary's gift is her response to the one she loves, not the mere fulfillment of a legal obligation. Consequently, Mary does not calculate the cost of her love the way that Judas does. Such love is at the heart of biblical economics.

Mary's gesture also provides a compelling example of courage and hope. To see this, we have to remember that the anointing scene takes place in the context of Jesus' imminent death. Jesus has been in hiding as the authorities look for a way to kill him. On his way back to Jerusalem – on his way into an inevitable clash with the powers of death - he stops in Bethany. Mary does not turn away from this reality or respond with anxiety or fear. Instead, she stays grounded in God's love.

Money and Extravagant Love

The primary gift I received through Mary's story was the gift of a profound experience of Jesus as The Beloved. Before meeting Mary, I engaged Jesus as a teacher who held up a standard that I struggled to achieve. My responses to Jesus' challenges about wealth had far more to do with doing the right thing than with responding to love. I wanted to be the rich ruler who got it right. I wanted to be the one who did not walk away. But something about asking the question that way kept the focus on me and kept me from really seeing and trusting the loving gaze of Christ (Mark 10:21).

Stumbling into Mary's story shifted that. Mary helped me to know – with the deep knowing that I experience in my body - that I am God's beloved. In the past, I thought I had to get the money questions right in order to be welcome in God's kingdom. But that approach left me feeling afraid and stuck. Without a deep sense of being held in God's extravagant love, I could not trust. I could not face the difficult decisions I needed to make. I could not let go of my safety nets. I could not believe that "what is impossible for human beings is possible for God." (Mark 10:27)

But when I have the conversation about money in the context of God's extravagant love, then I am free to experiment and to trust. I no longer feel compelled to work so hard to figure out what to do with my money. Instead, I listen for the Spirit's leading. I experiment with letting go. I face the difficult choices I need to make. With my focus on Jesus, my beloved, I am free to respond with love.

This is the kind of love I have known how to offer and receive with my body for a long time. It's what I received in my mother's arms and what I do every day as a mother. It's what I know as a lover. It's what I have experienced when I have held children in orphanages or when I have been held during moments of pain. It's what I did that night when I massaged my friend's feet and what I received when it was my turn. It's what I do when I offer food to someone on the streets. It's what I receive when I take communion. I know how to offer and receive extravagant love with my body. I am now learning how to do so with money.

I still wrestle with questions connected to biblical economics. I still find many of Jesus' teachings about money to be profoundly challenging. The situation in Haiti still breaks my heart. I haven't figured out all my money questions. But on a very deep level something in me has shifted. It has to do with the way I ask the questions. I no longer feel condemned by Jesus' economic challenges. Instead, I hear them as invitations to give and receive extravagant love.

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