

I remember when my brother in law was first diagnosed with ALS; Lou Gehrig's disease. It was a few weeks after my father was diagnosed with lung cancer. And a few short months after our whole family had a reunion to celebrate my dad's 80th birthday and my 50th. I look back on that reunion as a cherished memory and a pivotal turning point in my family. At the tormenting of my two sons and their cousins, it was the first time I ever shot-gunned a beer. We had such a good time together.

When Lou Gehrig's disease was the diagnosis, my sister and brother-in-law made plans. Bucket List plans. Extravagant plans, for them. They planned the trips they always wanted to take – an extended stay in a summer cottage overlooking the Atlantic Ocean in Newfoundland. That was the first summer. The next summer they flew to Vancouver and boarded a cruise ship for the trip up the inside passage to Alaska. And because they both wanted Ian to die at home, they had to have extensive renovations made to their home so that Ian would not have to climb the stairs. The main floor bathroom was refashioned to be wheel chair accessible.

To pay for the stuff that medical services doesn't cover (and there is lots), and to make the renovations to their home, Jody and Ian decided to ask their friends for help. They planned a huge birthday celebration for Ian: dancing, speeches, cake, a silent auction and a jar for donations. Now this was an event. Two hundred people showed up from all across the country. Sheila and I made a surprise trip and I can remember my sister's eyes when she saw us for the first time. That was fun. One of their nearest and best friends flew from Vancouver on the red-eye. He could only spend 30 minutes at the party and while he did, he wrote a cheque for \$10,000 and flew back to Vancouver on the very next red-eye.

In total, \$40,000 was raised to support Ian as he lived through the journey of ALS. He died quietly, a spiritual giant, with his family around him, trusting that a great crowd of witnesses waited for him, knowing he was loved deeply. His memorial service was a simple and honest celebration that honoured his whole life, warts and all. And we got to say thank you. I got say thank you twice - once at his birthday celebration, and then finally at his memorial service.

You may recall last week that I spoke about the context in which Jesus offered up the story of the prodigal son. It was an event. Anyone who was anyone was at that dinner.

And we discovered that as far as Jesus was concerned, anyone and everyone is a child of the divine – already loved, already blessed, already received and held, no conditions.

Marilyn mentioned that all four gospels have a version of the story of a woman pouring costly perfume on Jesus and anointing him. In John's version, it's Mary, the sister of Elizabeth and Lazarus, and it appears to be in celebration of Lazarus' return to life. This is the same Mary who sits at Jesus' feet listening intently to his every word, being present to his preaching, while Martha is off in the kitchen doing the busy work of offering hospitality. You'll remember how Martha shared her exasperation with Jesus because Mary wasn't helping her. That's who this Mary is.

And I'm thinking, Mary and Martha and Lazarus are throwing a dinner event like the one we read about last week. The movers and shakers of the community are gathered. Anyone who is anyone is also at this party. It seems the temple leaders are particularly interested because of what they heard about Lazarus coming out of the tomb, being raised from the dead. They probably paid to be at this party.

It seems that for this occasion, Mary has purchased a bottle of nard, a costly ointment used for anointing dead people before they are buried. Nard comes from the pink flowering, fragrant muskroot plant that grows in Northern India and in the high altitudes of the Chinese Himalayas. A bottle of the stuff cost about a year's wages. From other versions of this story we know that the ointment comes in a jar that has no stopper. To get to the oil, you have to break the top of the ceramic bottle; you have to use it all, it cannot be stored.

Imagine a dinner party with people gathered from all over. Conversation is lively and animated. In the middle of all the celebration, there would have been the sound of breaking ceramic. The musky, sensual smell, familiar to anyone who has been near a dead body would have gently filled the room. That alone would have turned heads. But to see Mary, one of the hosts of the party, on her feet in the position of a slave, anointing Jesus with the most expensive massage oil money can buy, caressing his toes with her hair...well that would have been scandalous. This may well shed some light on the nature of Jesus' relationship with Mary. Have you ever had your toes caressed with your partner's hair??

It's interesting to me that Judas has no trouble with the expense of this dinner party. He's eating and drinking someone else's food and drink just like all the rest of them. And I hunch that as a good Jewish boy, steeped in tradition, Judas would probably not have had any trouble anointing a dead person with this very same ointment.

But he takes Mary to task for the expense of the oil on the living guy because it could have been sold to support the people of the downtown eastside. The gospel writer makes the case that Judas isn't concerned for the poor because of the poor; he just says he's just a thief who has lost a way for the disciple coffers to be replenished.

I'm not especially interested in Judas' reaction. If this were our only experience of Judas we have, I think we see an emotionally immature man who can't stand to see Jesus held up in such adoration. He lashes out at Mary because she's the easiest one to bully.

I'm also not particularly interested in what Jesus says in response. The gospel writer has actually put words of the Old Testament in Jesus' mouth in this moment. From Deuteronomy 15, John has Jesus saying, there will always be poor among you, be generous with them.

Rather, I've got my eyes on Mary. In a very sensual act of subservience, I see Mary using the best of her resources to express thanks for the return of her brother. She sees Jesus as the one who restored her family, the one through whom Lazarus rediscovered life. Like the father who threw a great celebration in the parable of the prodigal son, this is an act of supreme humility and gratitude in the response to an act of profound grace.

Furthermore, given the apparent nature of their relationship, Mary would have been part of the inner circle. She would have heard Jesus speak of his own death. She would have been just as troubled as any of the disciples when he would go on about how he was to die. So it is in this moment, while she still can, with as many of the hoi polloi around, as publicly as she can, in the posture of a slave, Mary expresses her gratitude extravagantly because of how Jesus has changed her life.

Where do I go now? How does this apply to our lives? What does it mean for the Christ community? Every Sunday, before we receive the offering, someone says "all of life is pure gift, abundant and generous and our only response is thank you," and I wonder how you hear those words. I wonder how Jesus has really changed our lives. Has the act of public worship and the daily acts of discipleship we undertake every week helped us to touch the hem of his garment in a way that has empowered change in our lives? Like Mary, how do we publicly, generously, courageously, in the posture of a servant, express our gratitude with such faithful abandon and trust? This is the only place from where effective stewardship comes. From a changed heart.

Another thought: as we prepare to leave this building, how will we express our gratitude to the saints of this congregation of the past 100 years? Will we express our gratitude with such extravagant humility?

The answers to these questions lay in the hands of all of us. It's so freeing to be grateful with such generosity. What I know to be true is that regardless of how we say thank you, and even when we don't say thank you at all, we are still the beloved of God with whom God is well pleased. This is fixed forever. Amen.