

# Too Fast, Too Forward

A sermon preached by the Rev. Aaron Billard at  
St. John's United Church, Moncton, NB  
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I've come to a few conclusions this week. First, that coffee tastes better black. Another conclusion is a paradox. Life is both extremely unfair and radically beautiful, all at the same time. Another conclusion that I've come to is that friendship must not in any circumstance ever be taken for granted. And the final conclusion I've come to is that Silent Auctions are the least silent things that happen at this church!

Our very own Martha's in this congregation have been serving people for days with hospitality and friendliness; not only at the Silent Auction, but also standing at the ends of long tables pouring coffee and tea, and baking and preparing sandwiches and sweets for two large funerals - all the while keeping me fuelled on Robert Redford dessert and black coffee as I ran in and out of the church during the week. These Martha's have been laughing in our old halls, and silently grieving for one of their own. They have been the face of our church when we needed them most this past week, and I'd like to take a moment to honour their work. I would also like to take this time to thank our choir for being present this week. Both have been our face and hands, and both have represented us so well to the public.

Sometimes, just when life completely overwhelms us, it's worth a few moments to visit with Mary and Martha and Lazarus. It says that others were with them too, so I'd like to invite us all to that table this morning, to sit at their table with Jesus and let them take care of us for a while. It's a place

where we can be ourselves. Martha has cooked a beautiful meal, and the smell of it has filled the place. Meat cooking, freshly cut vegetables, olives to eat as an appetizer, and bread to dip in oil. Mary is hanging onto our every word, listening to our stories, no matter how boring they might be, and as a gracious host she listens to every word. I can see why Jesus likes it there. In fact, he loves them. It's the only story I can think of where Jesus makes a repeat visit to someone's house. I wonder if they made him laugh. I wonder if they simply allowed him to be Jesus.

Part of the surprise when we hear this story, of course, is Mary as she knelt to the floor, removed Jesus' shoes, perhaps rubbed his calloused feet, and poured beautiful perfume on them. Then she unfastened her hair, and let it fall on his feet as she wiped them with it. This was more than a precursor for the pedicure - this was an act of love between friends. There is no pretence now; they know who he is. They love him, too.

It's an awkward moment for everyone watching. To a Rabbi, for a woman to do such a thing, let alone in public, was just not acceptable, even in this band of holy rabble rousers. On cue, Judas objects, trying to appeal to Jesus' concern for the poor. It's too much, he's the treasurer, he looks after the money, and who does she think she is?

Without his usual caring approach, Jesus snaps, "Leave her alone," as if to say, "Don't you see what's happening here? For one moment, can't we take a few moments to show our appreciation to the people around us? Can't you learn from her?" It confirmed what Jesus must do. Mary is anointing him for burial. She knows he can't be talked out of his path - a path that has challenged the powers that be at every corner,

through acts of love, healing, and there was even that incident of the flipped table in the temple.

In a real way, as I would understand it, this is the closest thing to a funeral Jesus will have. Mary has acknowledged the *elephant* in the room. You anointed someone's head to make them a king. You anointed their feet when they were dead, or in this case, as good as dead.

When the disciples are given the same opportunity to minister to Jesus in the coming time, they turn on each other instead. They betray, and make promises they won't keep. But today, Mary rubbed his feet with oils, Martha gave him a home-cooked meal, and Lazarus sat beside him at the table, no doubt held captive as Jesus analyzed his situation. I wonder what it was that Jesus said just before Mary washed his feet. What was it that triggered in her a need to care for this man who has meant so much to her, to give such an extravagant gift?

Yesterday, at the funeral reception, Art Buck commented that he'd like to have a funeral while he was still alive. When I asked him why he said, "I just want to see who would come!"

It's the extravagance of the moment that draws me to it. Of this moment, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "This bottle will not be held back to be kept and admired. This precious substance will not be saved. It will be opened, offered and used, at great price. It will be raised up and poured out for the life of the world, emptied to the last drop. Before that happens, Jesus will gather his friends together one last time. At another banquet, around another supper table, with most of the same people present, Jesus will strip, tie a towel around his waist, and wash his disciples' feet. Then he will

give them a new commandment: Love one another, as I have loved you.”

Of this moment and this woman, theologian Paul Tillich said, “She has performed an act of holy waste growing out of the abundance of her heart.” Tillich observed, “Judas has his emotional life under control... Jesus (alone) knows that without the abundance of heart nothing great can happen... He knows that calculating love is not love at all.”

“The history of humankind,” Tillich continues, “is the history of men and women who wasted themselves, and were not afraid to do so. They did not fear to waste themselves in the service of a new creation. They wasted out of the fullness of their hearts.”

Isaiah put it this way: Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

Something we often forget in the short-term moments of life is that God is always at work in our lives doing a new thing, introducing a new friend, bringing us to a new place, sharing with our hearts a new insight, giving our minds new ideas, and opening us up to the spiritual realm where we become more aware, not just of our own needs, but, of the needs of others.

This church stands here each and every day as a sometimes silent, or sometimes noisy, reminder that God is at work in this city. This congregation stands as a reminder to each and every one who walks through these doors that ours is a God of hope – a God of new things.

What new thing is God doing in your life? What new thing is God doing in the life of St. John’s?

We all know someone whose love of life is extravagant. It's why our heroes are people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer who risked everything to resist the Nazi Gospel, and paid for it with his life. People like Stephen Lewis who calls for radical change in the way we treat and prevent HIV/AIDS in Africa. People like Nelson Mandela who works towards racial reconciliation and social justice.

Who are your heroes? Who are the extravagant ones in your life who call you to be more than you are?

Frederick Buechner writes that if the church is ever destroyed, it will not be "just from without by a world that sees it as a dead-end street, but by people like you and me who destroy it from within by our deadness and staleness, our failure to be brave, to be human, to take chances" ("Dereliction," *A Room Called Remember*, p. 125).

God be with all of you.