



The Cathedral of St. Andrew - Honolulu

Sermon: Year C – Fifth Sunday of Lent – April 7, 2019: Gram's Ginger Lei

We worship a God who rains manna down from heaven, whose son turns gallon after gallon after gallon of water into wine at a wedding in Cana, and then later feeds 5,000 people on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. And so, it seems to me that God is pretty extravagant and that God's grace and generosity *overflows* as it weaves its way in and out of our lives.

Today's Gospel seems to be almost matter-of-fact about the notion that Jesus is sitting in the house of Lazarus, a guy he raised from the *dead!* The guy was *dead* and his sisters were *grieving* and Jesus raised him to life. And so, it's no wonder to me that out of gratitude, the sister anoints his feet with the most expensive ointment she can find. She's so grateful, that she can't resist.

When I lived and worked in Hilo, a clergy colleague of mine said to me, "The hardest thing we have to do is give of ourselves – but it's also the easiest."

Over the years I've thought about what that actually means—giving of ourselves. And I think, for me, that while I give of my time, talent, and treasure; I also try to put my soul into the act of giving, trying to give all that I have – even my essence, my spirit, the core of who God created me to be. Giving of ourselves means giving from the soul.

That's what Mary (the sister of Lazarus) is doing in this story. She gives not only of the most expensive thing she can find, but also of herself and her soul – even using her hair to anoint the feet of Jesus, like she wants to give as much of herself as she can. We don't get any indication that she expects anything in return. She just does it. She listens to her heart.

And when we do that, when we listen to our hearts and give of ourselves from the depths of our souls, it seems natural – it's easy and smooth, like we're riding on some beautiful wave of goodness, mercy, compassion, and love. And I find that often times it doesn't seem like that big a deal, but to the person on the receiving end it seems like a huge deal.

When you think about it, how often does Jesus get thanked? It doesn't seem like that happens very often in the Gospel stories and they don't even spell that out specifically here, but if I were to conjecture at Mary's motives, I'd say she was acting out of gratitude when she anointed Jesus's feet with nard. To her that jar of ointment is worth giving out in its entirety. Jesus is totally worth it. And to Jesus, it seems like he's receiving the world from Mary, and he tells Judas to let them alone so as not to break that holy bond and that God-filled moment. It feels good to be thanked.

A couple of months ago I went to see Auntie Paulie Jennings in the hospital at Straub and I noticed that her room was filled with the fragrance of yellow ginger. And when I looked over at her bedside table, there was a glorious double yellow ginger lei that John Alexander had brought to her and Auntie Paulie being Auntie Paulie, she honored Hawaiian tradition and paid it forward to me as an expression of thanks for going to see her. "Lei are meant to be passed on," she said.

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And I brought that beautiful and extravagant lei home, and for that evening it filled my place with fragrant ginger. Then the next morning I took it and placed it on Bishop Chang’s grave to say thank you to him on the first anniversary of his death. I kept the tradition going by passing the lei on.

And then not long after that I went home for my grandmother’s 99th birthday and because John had been so generous with Auntie Paulie and Auntie Paulie had been so generous with me, I decided that after being on this planet for 99 years, my grandmother should get the same kind of extravagant flower lei. And so, I went down to Chinatown and got her one – and then almost died of sticker shock when I saw how much it was going to cost me. And then I thought, “What the heck. Your grandmother is going to turn 99 only once. Just buy the darned thing.”



My grandmother doesn’t like to be fussed over, but I defied her norms and got her the lei anyway because I was just so grateful that, 1, she’s been with us for 99 years; and 2, this is a lady who took me in when I was 12 years old and sent me to college on her Social Security checks. Believe you me, I am grateful to her.

And the thing that sealed the deal for me was remembering this morning’s gospel story where Jesus calls us to be extravagant in our expressions of thanks.

And when I gave my grandmother that beautiful lei, she just smiled and smiled and had a glint of tears in her eyes—and it made her happy, which made me happy – and then I found out about a week later that the next day she took the lei down to the senior center and gave it to one of the workers there. She took her happiness and her gratitude and passed it on. And it was worth every penny I spent on that lei, and I have zero regrets.

My mantra for the past several years has been that we need to operate out of abundance rather than scarcity – and I mean that mostly in terms of money, but it can also mean in terms of who we are as human beings. If we have ourselves, then we have a lot to offer the world and the biggest trick is to get out of that feeling of unworthiness and realize that, because until we do, it’s not fair to the world and it’s not fair to God.

God was extravagant to us when God came to us in human form to experience us as fully as God could. And God wanted us to know what love was, to infuse us with his love so that we would let go of old ways of thinking and old ways of doing things – things which no longer work, especially that notion that might is right, and so he came to us as a poor baby in a cave and died a death of shame on a cross. That is the most extravagant giving of oneself that I can think of.

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And I think we are called to mirror that, ever so slightly, in the way we interact with others—by giving of ourselves. So be extravagant. Be extravagant with your compassion. Be extravagant with your love. Be extravagant with your kindness. Be extravagant with your forgiveness. Be extravagant with your gratitude. Be extravagant with yourselves and all that you are and all that you have to offer to others and to God. And then, I guarantee you, this will be a holy and blessed Lent.

Amen.