

Sermon for Sunday, March 21, 2010, First Baptist Church, Midland, MI by Joseph I. Mortensen

Text: John 12:1-11 Title: Mary's Extravagance

You can never tell what might happen when people sit down to eat together.

Alexander the Great, having conquered much of the known world, sat down to enjoy a lavish banquet in Babylon. He got sick and died 11 days later in June 323 BC. He was but 33 years old.

Alexander Hamilton said some nasty words at the dinner table about his political enemy Aaron Burr. His remarks led to the most famous duel in American history. Tragically, Hamilton came in second at the duel.

The idea for creating the Statue of Liberty as a gift of the French people to the United States was hatched at dinner at the home of a French professor. As it happened, one of the guests that night in Versailles was a young French sculptor obsessed with creating monuments of colossal size: Frederic-Auguste Bertholdi.

Those of us old enough to remember will never forget that dinner in Tokyo when then President George H.W. Bush couldn't keep his dinner down. As if that weren't enough, his host the Prime Minister was in the line of fire.

Two computer geeks, both of them out of work, broke, and buried under huge credit card debts, met at a dinner. That chance meeting produced **YouTube**. You never know what may happen when folks sit down to eat together.

The Bible features some memorable dinners, too.

One of the most famous is King Belshazzar's feast in Daniel 5. Having overindulged in wine, Belshazzar decided to dazzle his guests with a display of gold and silver vessels his father Nebuchadnezzar had seized from the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. Then everybody drank some more wine. All of a sudden Belshazzar was terror stricken as he saw the fingers of a human hand writing on the plaster of the wall of the royal palace. The Bible says he turned pale, his thoughts terrified him, his limbs gave way and his knees knocked together. Belshazzar couldn't decode the "handwriting on the wall". His wise men couldn't decode it.

Then his wife intervened. She knew about Daniel's gifts for interpreting dreams and things. So they brought in Daniel. Belshazzar promised Daniel great reward if he could

decode the message. But Daniel said, "Stuff it. Give it to someone else. I'll interpret the message anyway." But not before he preached a pretty good sermon to Belshazzar, spelling out the king's sins in detail. Then Daniel began to decipher the message written on the palace wall by the mysterious hand. Belshazzar would wish he hadn't asked. The words were *Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin* -- "*Mene* - God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end. *Tekel* - you have been weighed on the scales and found wanting. *Upharsin* - your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians." That very night Belshazzar was killed.

You never know what may happen when people sit down to dinner.

Then there was that big dinner that Herod threw. John the Baptist had angered Herod when he pointed out in public the ruler's brazen adultery with his brother's wife. (Mark 6:14ff) So Herod threw John the Baptist in jail. At the dinner in question no doubt the wine flowed and judgment went out the door. A dance by his new wife's daughter so pleased him that he promised anything she asked, "anything, just say it, to half of my kingdom." She consulted with her mother and came back with her request: the head of John the Baptist, at once, on a platter. Herod had given his word. You never know what may happen when people sit down to dinner.

The most important dinner of all in the Bible is, of course, The Last Supper, which we will have occasion to remember in the next couple of weeks. There is also what I will call the next to last supper in the scripture read this morning in John 12. To which we turn now.

This dinner was surely meant to be a happy occasion, celebrating Lazarus' return to life when Jesus called him forth from the tomb. Lazarus was reunited with his sisters Martha and Mary. Many people had come to believe in Jesus because they had witnessed this wonder. So, it says in John 12:1,2, "Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him."

Nevertheless, dark clouds hovered over that home in Bethany. Forebodings of death filled the place. For you see the guest of honor was a wanted, hunted man. His raising of Lazarus had convinced great crowds of people that he was the Messiah; they believed in him; the news also attracted great crowds of more curiosity seekers. All of this energy and expectation necessarily got the attention of those who ran things in Jerusalem -- the chief priests and rulers. They rightly feared that news of a new king would draw unwanted attention from Rome. Caesar would not put up with rivals. If the people followed Jesus, the rulers said to each other, "If we let Jesus go on like this, everyone

will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." One high priest, called Caiaphas, calmed then down with this counsel, "It is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." They agreed and from that day they planned to put Jesus to death. The man whose death would be a good thing for the country was chief guest at the table that evening in Bethany.

It's impossible for us to know who of those gathered around the table understood what about the situation, how dire it was, how close to the end it all was. Lazarus, the sudden celebrity already being sought after by curious crowds, was there "reclining at the table" in the fashion of those days. Lazarus' devoted sister Martha busied herself with the details of the feast.

The other sister Mary -- we call her Mary of Bethany so we don't confuse her with Mary the mother of Jesus, or Mary Magdalene or any other Mary -- this Mary stands out in the drama of this dinner. We already know that Mary isn't much into cooking and serving and cleanup; she drives Martha up the wall. Martha, we may well believe, has long considered her sister a bit spacey, an airhead, not a practical cell in her pretty head. It's true now. Mary's thoughts are far, far from which course comes after which, or where the forks go, and how to fold napkins. Mary has something else on her mind. She as much or more than anyone in the house seems to have sensed the gravity of the moment. How she knew, I don't know, but it's clear that she knew ... something.

And so Mary, almost certainly not one of those actually reclining around the table in this male-dominated setting, makes her entry. In an audacious way, no doubt violating custom and decorum, she steps into the center of the stage.

Mary seizes the moment. She had to know that Jesus' days were numbered. She had to know that the authorities were out to get him. She had to know there was something final and unrepeatable about this dinner. Such a moment will never come her way again. That mysterious "hour" Jesus had spoken of must be near at hand. Now was no time to hold back anything.

Mary took a pound of costly perfume, uncorked it, and anointed Jesus' feet with this precious, almost priceless oil or ointment. Then she wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

How most people reacted to what she did we'll have to guess. Judas Iscariot, it's safe to say, didn't pick up on the scent that filled the place. He alone had something to say: "Why was this perfume not sold for 300 denarii and the money given to the poor?"

Judas was not at all on the same wave length as Mary. He didn't, couldn't see Mary's act as the deeply devoted loving thing it was. He couldn't notice at all the profound significance of anointing the feet, rather than the head, of Jesus. Normally one would anoint the head of someone. Anointing of feet was saved for the dead as part of the burial ritual, to cover the smell of decay.

Judas' spectacles were etched with dollar signs. Judas, this thief who cared not at all for the poor, saw in Mary's action only the stupid squandering of a great business opportunity, one he'd gladly negotiate, especially if he could pocket a proper commission, in the same way he pilfered the common purse of the disciples. Why this waste? He didn't get where he was by engaging in such foolhardy extravagance. He didn't get to be treasurer for Jesus' band of disciples by being stupid about money.

He knew the worth of things: 300 denarii, a laboring man's wages for a whole year? Gone! Evaporated with in a few minutes. One wonders, however, at his scale of values. Within a few days he would sell out his own teacher and Lord at a drastic discount, for 30 pieces of silver, 1/10 of the worth of Mary's bottle of perfume.

But Jesus said, "Let her be, leave her alone, that she may keep it for the day of my burial." I can't help thinking that Mary's unusual action, anointing the feet not the head in anticipation of Jesus' death is a sign of her readiness to follow him each step of the way to the cross.

Mary had set the priceless stuff aside, stored it up, waiting for the right time. It is tempting to see in it a symbol of full realization of God's promise to Israel just waiting to be let loose in the world. Blessing so long awaited is about to be realized.

Above all else, Mary's audacity and extravagance are signs of God's extravagant grace, of God's love for the whole world. Mary of Bethany has forever done us the favor of reminding us that a gift ungiven and unwrapped blesses no one. The joy and delight of perfume occur only when it's poured out and its fragrance fills the room. She unbottled the blessing; it's a parable of Jesus' self-giving, his sacrifice, his outpouring of love, bringing fullness of grace. It was no good saving the precious bottle for another, better time. There was no other, better time. And she did it all without saying a word.

Many years ago, when the musical *South Pacific* was playing on Broadway, Oscar Hammerstein, the co-writer of the show, lay dying. He wrote a brief note to the star of the show, Mary Martin. She opened it. It said, "A bell is no bell 'til you ring it. A song is no song 'til you sing it. Love in your heart is not put there to stay. Love is not love... 'til

you give it away." That night, so the story goes, Mary sang in such a way that the audience was unusually moved. Asked about her performance, she said, "Tonight, I gave my love away."

What happened in Bethany where Jesus and Lazarus and others gathered around a table is a one-off thing, an unrepeatable moment, wrapped in mystery. Yet some of what we see in the audacious action of Mary of Bethany we may well transfer to our lives as disciples.

In the movie "Bucket List" two terminally-ill cancer patients, who couldn't be more unlike, share a hospital room. The two characters, played by Morgan Freeman and Jack Nicholson, draw up a list of things, a bucket list, as in "kick the bucket", that they want to do with the limited time they have left.

Without getting too morbid about it, how about our own list? The moments of our lives are unrepeatable, too. You don't need to be as old as I am to realize this. There are needs to be met, commitments you've postponed, forks in the road awaiting a decision. Is it time to go for broke, take a chance, take some steps in faith?

Fourteen years ago I was asked if I'd like to go Russia to teach. It was short notice. It was a subject I'd never taught. I wouldn't have to learn Russian. But I'd have to pay my own way. I said, "I'll get back to you." So I talked with Kathy about it. She said, "Wait just a minute." She left the room and returned very soon and handed me a small zippered cloth bag. "Open it," she said. I did. In side was a stack of twenties, not enough for the whole cost, but a very good down payment. I am so glad I took that chance. And I'm so glad now for the opportunity to go to Ghana this summer as part of the group from our church. Why not?

There are times to drop your guard, stop holding back, delaying, postponing some important decision, thinking some day when I get around to it, I will.... It may well be the question of deciding to follow Christ. Or baptism. Or taking a new direction? Or renewed commitment to the Lord's church and its work?

Like Mary of Bethany -- seizing the moment, audacious, daring; like Mary of Bethany -- blessing the whole house with her loving gift; like Mary of Bethany -- following Jesus, even to the cross.