

AND NEVER COUNT THE COST

John 12:1-8

November 15, 2009

(Stewardship Sunday)

There is a beautiful prayer in the book of Psalms. Psalm 116, I think it is... the prayer of one who's been saved from death. And part of that prayer says something like this. It says:

**What can I offer the Lord
for all he has done for me?
I will lift up the cup of salvation
and praise the Lord's name for saving me.
I will keep my promises to the Lord
in the presence of all his people.**

What can I offer the Lord for all he has done for me?

Well ... Zorba Dukakis thought he'd just pay him cash. Not in this life, mind you, but in the next. When he saw him in person. On the other side of the grave, I suppose. It sounds strange, I know. But that must have been his thinking. Because he took it *with* him (when

he died). Really, he did. He had lived lavishly all his² life... A mansion in Bellaire. Two "Jags," a Ferrari, and a Rolls in the driveway. He even had his own personal chef in the kitchen. And a diamond clustered Rolex on his arm. Nothing was too much for Zorba Dukakis. No price was too high, no amount of money too great when it came to happiness, mind you. And he was generous, too. His "people," he called them, lived in the lap of luxury. The man was just loaded. Filthy rich we'd have said in Wayne County. And so extravagant.

And then he found out he had a terminal illness and not long to live. So he went home to his beautiful mansion and had one of his "people" call his three best friends to come as quickly as possible. And they did. They did. His three best friends -- his doctor, his priest, and his lawyer. And when they arrived, he gave them five-hundred thousand dollars. Each! And he said, "Now, I've always heard that you can't take it with you. But I got to thinking about that," he said, "and did a little research. And I've come to the conclusion that no one has ever tried!" So he said, "I want you fellows to assure me you'll each put this half million in cash

into my casket at my funeral and have it buried with³ me.” And they each said they would -- his doctor, his priest, and his lawyer. One million, five hundred thousand dollars. In the *casket!*”

A month later, Zorba passed on. And after the funeral, the three friends went to Starbuck’s for coffee. And as they were there sipping their Lattes the doctor looked at the priest and said, "Father, I have a confession to make ... I didn't put the money in the casket. I gave it to the hospital foundation to build a new children's wing.”

And the priest said, “Well, I’m afraid I’ve a wee confession to make too.” He said, “I didn't put that half million he gave me in the casket, either. I gave it to the *Little Sisters of the Poor* to build a new treatment center at the nursing home.”

And the lawyer looked at them both and said, “I can’t believe what I’m hearing. I’m ... I’m aghast.” And he said, “I’ll have you know that our dear friend was buried with my personal check for the full \$500,000!”

It reminds me of a church bulletin I saw a few⁴ years ago. It had all kinds of strange things in it. Misspelled words. Awkwardly worded announcements. Strange things. It was the sort of thing that stops a preacher dead in his tracks and makes him think, “There but for the grace of God go I.” Because there was a little blurb on the announcement page that day that said, “***As the maintenance of the churchyard is becoming increasingly costly, it would be appreciated if those who are willing would clip the grass around their own graves.***”

And a bit further down the page there was a preview of things to come, I guess, in the service the next Sunday. It said, **The choir will sing, “*I Heard the Bills On Christmas Day.*”** Oh, and the pastor would be preaching a sermon titled “**Change Your Wife through Prayer.**” Can you believe that? There it was! Right there on the announcement page of the Sunday bulletin!

And there were some strange things in the order of worship for that Sunday, too. The Opening Hymn, it

said, was number 358, “**Gold Will Take Care of You.**”⁵ And the Offertory hymn wasn’t misspelled, really, it just seemed a bit odd. Because the bulletin had, **The Giving of Our Tithes and Offerings** there on the left side of the page. And right out from it, it said, “**Jesus Paid It All.**” ✠ It’s a lovely old hymn, you know. We used to sing it often at Beaver and Blue Jay. I don’t think it’s ever been in one of our hymnals, but you’ve heard it, I’m sure. It says,

**Jesus paid it all, All to Him I owe;
Sin had left a crimson stain,
He washed it white as snow.**

Jesus paid it all. Isn’t that what Isaiah said? **Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.** Oh, Jesus paid it all...

But how can I repay him? What can I offer the Lord⁶ for all he has done for me?

I wonder if that isn’t what Mary thought ... about Jesus, I mean. “How can I *repay* him? He’s done so much. He’s touched our lives in so many ways. My brother wouldn’t *be* here had it not been for him.” And it’s true. It’s true. Lazarus, her brother got terribly sick. And whatever it was -- the flu or a virus or some sort of infection -- *whatever* it was it was simply too much. And Lazarus died. One of Jesus’ closest friends he was. And when he died, Jesus came. But not right away. He’d been in the tomb four days, says John, by the time Jesus got there. And yet, Jesus stood at the entrance of the tomb -- there in the face of death itself -- and he called Lazarus up from the dead and gave him life... From death to life...

So, I wonder if the words of that Psalm crossed Mary’s mind (and her heart) that evening. I wonder if she thought of those words from the ancient prayer of one who was saved from death -- **How can I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me? What can I do?**

Well ... this is what she did. She left the room for a⁷ just moment. And when she returned she was carrying a bottle or a jar full of perfume. A very *special* perfume made from pure *nard* or *spikenard*, they called it. Something *precious* it was. Expensive. Costly perfume this nard was then. And it wasn't the kind Mary the sister of Lazarus might have dabbed behind her ears and on her neck and wrists. It was much too expensive for that. [No] This was the kind of perfume that would have been used only once in a lifetime. The kind reserved to prepare a body for the tomb.

She carried the jar into the room and up to the table where Jesus was seated. And she knelt there beside him and poured it out and rubbed it gently into his feet. She *anointed* his feet! It took a whole year's worth of wages to buy that perfume. And she poured it out on his feet. And she wiped them with her hair ... Costly. Extravagant. Lavish it was.

People in that part of the world were known for their hospitality, you know. Even strangers would receive a warm welcome. And the host and his family would go out of their way to make them feel at home.

But this wasn't just hospitality here. It was something⁸ more. The kind of thing that makes people blush and spread gossip. A woman who did something as *intimate* and *loving* as that would be labeled for life. And she didn't just touch him, mind you, and caress his feet. She used the nard. Precious, costly, expensive ointment.

And when Judas (the treasurer) saw it, he was aghast! He was horrified! "What are you doing?" he said. "You could've sold that," he said. "You could have sold it for as much as somebody could earn in a year! And with that kind of money you could have made a difference for the poor and the needy."

But Judas didn't *really* care about the poor, it says there in John. He didn't care about helping anyone but himself! Which is exactly what he did, according to John. He would help himself to the money that was set aside for them. So Jesus said, "Leave her alone, Judas. She bought it for the day of my burial. Besides," he said, "You *can* help the poor. You can *always* help them. They're not going anywhere... But *I* am," he said. "You won't always have me."

So there it is ... Judas wanted to take. He wanted⁹ to get whatever he could out of his walk with Jesus. But Mary wanted to give. And she wanted to love. Whatever the cost. She wanted to give him the best that she *had* ... and the best that she was. **L**

Extravagant, costly, and precious was the love she lavished upon him. And what she did was almost like a parable without words ... or maybe a living picture or symbol of what he had done, and what he *would* do in six days at a place called Golgotha. **For there he would lavish his love upon us. He would pour out his blood, his life on the cross for us ... for you and for me.**

And yet, that was the price he was willing to pay because he loved us -- because he loves you and longs to be with you always (at the very center of your life). Remember what Saint Paul said about that? You hear it sometimes when we pray the prayer of confession. He said, **While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man -- though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die. But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.**

God is like that, you know. Rich in mercy. Lavish in¹⁰ love. Slow to be angry, abounding in lovingkindness and grace. But what do you do with such a gift? What *can* you do?

Well, the popular thing, I suppose, would be to receive it. Soak it up like a sponge. Just let God love you. Isn't that what they say? And they're right, you know. They are. Remind yourself as much as you can that you are God's own. His beloved. The apple of his eye, it says in the Psalms. Let God take you into his hands as a potter would take a piece of clay, that he may shape you and mold your heart and your life in the shape of his love. Spend time with him in prayer everyday. Listen with your heart as you read the bible slowly and prayerfully at the end of the day, or first thing in the morning. Soak up his love. Let it fill you up. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels," says Paul. And you are that vessel ...

But don't forget to pour it out! Not every now and then, mind you. But every day. At every opportunity ... Give it away., Love your neighbors. Love the stranger. And love your enemies, he says. **AND NEVER COUNT**

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THE COST. For God's love is to be lavished on others. And there's only one condition: that you give it to someone who needs it. And you know who that is. You know ... [I can't think of anyone anywhere who *doesn't* need it.]

Oh, and what do we get out of it? Well ... let me try to answer that with a story. A true story....

William Barclay, a great Scottish preacher, was on a train going home to Glasgow, not long after World War II. And at Victoria Station in London, he said two young men boarded the train. And they took their seats in the same compartment he was in, so that their seats were facing his. And just after the train pulled out of the station, one of the men fell to the floor, trembling and thrashing violently with a seizure. And his young friend picked him up and put him back on the seat. And he wiped the sweat from his face and put a pillow behind his head. And he covered him with a blanket.

And when his friend had begun to calm down, the young man turned to Dr. Barclay. And he said, "I'm

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sorry, Mister. I was hoping this wouldn't happen. He has these seizures two or three times a month. And he just had one a few days ago. So I wasn't expecting another one so soon." And Dr. Barclay said, "Oh, you don't need to apologize. I understand, completely."

But the young man said, "Oh, you can't really understand." He said, "My friend here and I were in the invasion at Normandy. He's English and I'm an American. And we were both wounded," he said. "My leg was blown off" (and he tapped on his leg to show him that it was wood). My friend here had shrapnel wounds all across his chest. A hand grenade had blown away part of his chest and shoulder." And he went on. He said, "I don't know how he did it, Mister, but he got to his feet and he grabbed my shirt and started dragging me out of there. There were bullets flying everywhere and grenades going off all around us." And he said, "I'll never forget it. He was screaming in pain with every step."

And at that point the young American man had to stop to wipe away the tears. And then he said, "I kept telling him to go on and save himself. But he told me,

‘No. If you die ... I die with you. I won’t leave you¹³ here.’ And somehow, somehow he managed to get us to a medic.”

And he said, “Two years ago, I found out that he had this condition.” And he said, “I’m single – no wife and no kids. So I sold my house and my furniture, and quit my job, and cashed in my savings. And I came over here to take care of him. Because he doesn’t have any family and he needs constant care. And I can do that,” he said. “I can serve him as long as he needs me.”

And William Barclay said, “Friend, you don’t have to explain any more. That’s the most beautiful and noble story I’ve ever heard in my life.” And the young man said, “No, you don’t understand.” He said, “After what he did for me ... there isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for him.”

Do you know what Jesus has done for you? Do you know? Do you know what Jesus had done for you?

Extravagant. Costly. Precious is that gift. And on this holy day, God in his grace gives us another gift, so precious and holy. He gives us the chance to receive

his love, to be shaped in heart and life by that love.¹⁴ And to commit ourselves anew to live it and share it and give it to others as his disciples, his people here in this place.

**What can I offer the Lord
for all he has done for me?
I will lift up the cup of salvation
and praise the Lord’s name for saving me.
I will keep my promises to the Lord
in the presence of all his people.**

This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

SOLI DEO GLORIA
BENEDI, OBLISB



