

Not a mite would I withhold. A sermon preached on February 21, 2016 (Lent II) at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George by Rev. Herb Hilder.

Lessons: EXODUS 30:30-33
MARK 14:1-9

As a parish minister, one carries the memories of many parishioners. Two such special people in my memory were sisters who never missed a service or an event at a church I served.

Both had been teachers in the community for close to 40 years and so they had among other things historic memory about most of the people who were now grown ups in the town

In the congregation, the ladies which was the name by which they were universally known were respected,

Their opinions and views always considered.

Like the late Lil Brown of this congregation. The 'ladies' dressed elegantly and always proper.

So you can imagine my discomfort the first time we sang morning's opening hymn and got to the 4th verse *take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold.*

And with the singing, the older of the ladies still singing, turned around and scoped out the congregation during that verse

Same behavior the next time we sang the hymn and after the 3rd time over the course of a few years that we sang it, I had to know why the behavior on that verse.

So that week, I made a point of making a call on the ladies.

After the obligatory news catch up, the 1 ½ cups of good strong Maritime tea, I asked with some hesitation, Mrs. Beale, I have noticed that when we sing *Take my life and let it Be*, and we get to verse 4 -*take my silver and my gold*, you continue singing but you turn around and stare at all the people around you.

Why do you do this?

“Because Mr. Hilder , people do not really mean what they are singing when they sing this verse.

If they did, we would not have to worry about church budgets

The conversation moved on to other things, but as I chose the opening hymn for this morning,

As I sang it,

Katharine and I could see quite clearly that memory of Mrs. Beale, turning around, glaring at the people around her.

This morning's story from Mark tells of a woman who did not withhold a mite
 She broke an alabaster flask of nard – very expensive perfume made from root plants along the Ganges River in India

And then poured the flask's entire contents on Jesus head

It is an action that causes gasps, shock and criticism from those in the room.

But for Jesus'

Let her alone, why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. She has done what she could. Truly I tell you wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her

I wonder what it was like. To be Jesus. To be the woman. To be one of the guests at the party.

I wonder what sort of facial expressions the guests had as the smell of nard hit their nostrils.

I wonder how many of the guests knew it was nard – a Silk Road treasure perfume

I wonder how long it took before the murmuring started.

I wonder how many present truly grasped the meaning of Jesus' response to this example of extravagant giving to and for Him.

What does the woman's action, the guests' response and Jesus' words say to us today?

The story reminds us that *at times in our lives, lavish and extravagant giving is the right response to the love from and nearness we feel to the Lord Jesus.*

There is mystery here in Mark about what prompts the woman's actions.

Mark does not even identify the woman by name. Her actions were certainly not prompted by the need for tax relief – for such things did not exist in Biblical times

Maybe it is just as well we are not told the reason for her action – lest we become all specific and conditional about lavish giving in particular and giving in general.

As I read and reflect on the story of Jesus told by the 4 gospels, both for personal up building and perspective as well as for leading worship,

I am both amazed and distressed at how infrequently people thanked Jesus for things he did for them.

Remember the story of the 10 lepers Jesus healed? And only one returns to thank Jesus. Only after the Resurrection and then by prompting does Peter say, **Lord, you know that I love you. (Jn 22)**

I wonder if one of the reasons the woman's act stands out is that such expressions of

thankfulness and love toward Jesus are so infrequent in the Gospels
 Lavish, spontaneous and extravagant giving remains one way WE can respond in profound thankfulness to the person and nearness of Jesus, His Father and our Father
 And the gift of the Spirit working in our lives.

The story as told by Mark here in chapter 14 of his gospel also highlights *that such lavish giving is often 'the right in God's eyes' response, even if it make little or no rational sense.*

How show affection, love, and thankfulness is mostly channeled through routines of duty
 And standard patterns of expression – as it should be.

The woman's actions though remind us that sometimes it is okay,
 It is good,
 It is RIGHT to break out of routines and expected behavior and standards in spectacular displays of extravagant giving.
 The woman certainly did not have to break the flask and pour the entire contents of the flask on Jesus' head
 Her spontaneous act surprises everyone.
 I wonder did what she did, surprise even her.
 Let me tell you a story

In our last year in Ontario before moving East to Atlantic Canada,

We became part of a Christian couples support group

It was a wonderful time and we learned a whole bunch of life and faith lessons from the group.

At one meeting, a couple with whom we had become especially close said that owing to changes in the school catchment boundaries their two oldest children would have to travel some distance to school and there was no free school bus service provided

Getting to school by car would not be a problem as the oldest of the children had her driver's license

The problem was the car to get to school.

The family had only one car and it was needed by the father to get to his work in a neighbouring town in the opposite direction to the school.

Owing to the family's financial realities at that point, buying a second car – even a beater was not an option.

As we drove home that evening after the meeting,

Katharine and I thought was there anything we could do to help this couple.

Independently we each said at the same time – we could give them one of our cars.

We knew by this point we were moving to the East and would not need, nor could we afford to run two big engine cars on one salary.

Both cars were older in years, but both had been well maintained – neither was a beater.

We agreed to sleep on it, pray about it in the morning.

Next morning came, we prayed about it and we were still at peace about the decision to give one of the cars to this couple who had been so kind to us through some difficult times in our early married life.

After supper that evening, each of us drove one of the cars to the couples' home.

After exchanging porch pleasantries, we said, “we have been thinking about the matter of needing a second car so your kids could get to school and what we want to do is to give you one of our cars as a gift. You would just have to pay for the re-licensing.

They were gob smacked; as I think we were when we heard ourselves make the offer,

We continued though to be at peace about the matter

It seemed to be the right thing to do.

We kept in touch with this couple many years after we left Ontario

Each time they wrote to us, there was always a note of how the gift car was still doing yeoman service.

When we gave the car to them it had just over 110,000 miles on it

The last time we heard about “the car” and this is many years ago, it had 352,000 miles on it and was still going strong!!!!

You folk are the first congregation to whom I have told this story.

And it is not told to say, look at Katharine and Herb – for in the matter of giving, I am someone who works on the principle of let not your right hand know what your left hand is doing.

I tell it as an example of lavish giving – giving that we knew then was the right thing to do for that couple at that time.

I tell it to remind you as well as me that internal prompting, touch of the Spirit, nearness of the Holy may well prompt any of us to lavish and extravagant giving at some point in our life Without worrying primarily about charitable receipts, a listing on a donor sheet or name engraved on a plaque somewhere.

Worry overly too much about those things and yes, you will probably give and even generously, but you will never give lavishly and extravagantly and be at peace about doing so!!

The story also reminds us that *lavish, extravagant and often spontaneous giving does not always meet with universal praise and understanding.*

You see this in the story 'Karenza read from Mark.

When the woman pours the nard over Jesus there is shock, anger, a beautiful act is termed wasteful, scolding of the woman, wiser choices would have been better.

I wonder what Mark does not include when he talks about the criticism not only about the woman's action, but of the woman herself

I wonder why it is so often the case that criticism so quickly follows and is often so strident after lavish and extravagant giving is shown.

I wonder,

Does criticism about such actions and those who do them reveal more about the critic of the action, than the action itself?

I wonder was the criticism of the woman's actions really an attempt by the critics to hide a failure in their own lives to be generous, To live in the light of what God has given and done in all lives.

Criticism of actions that are lavish and extravagance is often a real hard reality to swallow

To come back to the gift car story for a moment

We never told our respective parents about what we had done.

But our parents found out – parents always find out don't they?

Per usual, my Dad said very little

My mother, too much and all of it negative.

Haven't we taught you about the responsible use of money?

When will you learn the value of a dollar?

What if you need a second car in the Maritimes?

Who are these people you gave the car to?

A final postscript to the story and funny twist to the story was that when my mother went into nursing care, many years later, She was adamant that I have her car and she paid for the transfer of licensing.

That 'gift car' enabled Katharine to accept for a number of years Sunday pulpit supply work in neighbouring communities which helped us financially when my mother's declining health forced me to make more trips back to Ontario than I would have wished and when she outlived her income.

Funny old world isn't it!

Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold

The anonymous woman in Mark 14 did precisely that when she broke open the alabaster flask and anointed Jesus with its expensive contents.

In our trying to model and reflect best the ways of Jesus, honesty and humility are foundational, but I believe so is a willingness to be open and aware to opportunities and times to practice lavish, extravagant, generous and often spontaneous giving –

For this too is an accurate reflection of who God is and the way he has dealt with each of us first.