

THE FEAST, THE PERFUME AND THE COINS**MATTHEW 26:1-16**

On the dashboards of those small two-seater airplanes is a safety device usually referred to as a stall warning indicator. Now, the stall warning indicator is there to help you avoid big trouble. In a light plane, you'll fall right out of the sky if you get below a certain speed. For instance, if your stall speed is 55 mph, the stall warning indicator will start to buzz around 60 mph. When the buzzer squawks and the red light flashes, you know you're close to losing control of the plane. The stall warning indicator helps you avoid tragedy.

Today is the first Sunday of the yearly Christian season of Lent. Lent is a forty day period of time leading up to Holy Week when Christians the world over are encouraged to think about the significance of Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection. I like to think of Lent as a kind of spiritual stall warning indicator. It's there every year to help us avoid big trouble in our lives spiritually. Since we're all sinful people, it's all too easy for us to drift into much less than what God intended for us. Lent can be a time, then, to take stock of our lives and discover whatever might be stalling our efforts to follow Jesus.

This Lenten season I'd like to explore the story of Jesus' last week before His death on the cross and resurrection through the eyes of Matthew. He records those events for us in chapter 26-28 of his Gospel account. Each week through Easter Sunday, I'd like us to take in three pictures, three images or three scenes found in the text itself. I'm calling this series of messages "Pictures of the Passion." Passion, by the way, is a word that refers to the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus – all the events compressed into what is surely the single most amazing week in all time and history. This morning, then, let's consider the first sixteen verses of Matthew 26. There we find three pictures or images that remind us of the significance of what Jesus did for us. The first picture is of...

THE FEAST (v. 1-5)

Let's consider v. 1-5. What feast is being spoken about here? The greatest feast in the Jewish faith – the yearly Passover Feast. The city of Jerusalem would have been bulging way beyond capacity this time of year with millions of Jewish pilgrims from all over the world present who sacrificed hundreds of thousands of lambs upon the great altar at the Jewish Temple as an act of worship. Now the Jewish leaders at that time – Caiaphas, the high priest, and others – hated Jesus. They wanted to wait until after the week long Passover festival was over to kill Jesus. After all, with the Romans running the country, riots could break out and then the Romans would come down hard on the people causing the trouble but also upon the Jewish leaders themselves.

What was the Passover Feast all about? If you remember your Old Testament, you'll recall that the Passover Feast started when the people of Israel were in slavery to the Egyptians some 3500 years ago. God called Moses to lead the

Jewish people out of Egypt and into the promised land of Canaan – present day Israel. The Egyptian Pharaoh, however, wasn't about to let his cheap labor force just walk out of the country without a fight. So, God sent terrible plagues upon Egypt but still Pharaoh refused to set the Jewish people free. Finally, God sent the angel of death and the first born child in every family died. There was only one way to escape this terrible judgment. The Jewish people were instructed to kill a lamb, take some of the blood and wipe it on the sides and the top of the door frames of their houses. In each home, the family was to cook and eat the lamb as part of the feast. When the angel of death saw the blood of the lamb, he would literally pass over – thus the name “Passover” – and the life of the first born child in that home would be spared.

It was a terrible night. In every Egyptian home – including the palace of Pharaoh himself – there was weeping and wailing because in every home the first born died. But there was no grief in any Jewish home. When the angel of death saw the blood of the lamb smeared on the door frame, he passed over and didn't strike the first born dead in that home. On that very night, God used Moses to lead the Jewish people out of Egypt never to return. Every year now, - including this year – Jewish people celebrate this great act of divine salvation and deliverance with a feast – the Passover Feast. Many Christians celebrate the Passover Feast, too. In fact, we'll be celebrating it here in our church on the Thursday before Easter Sunday. You'll be hearing much more about that event and how you can participate in it in the weeks ahead, so stay tuned!

Why would we, as Christians, want to observe a feast that belongs to the Jewish faith? Because Jesus fulfilled the imagery and symbolism embedded in the feast itself. It was the desire and intent of God Himself for Jesus to be crucified during the Passover festival. Why? The Passover actually pointed to a far greater salvation event than getting the Jewish people out of Egypt. It pointed to what God was going to do in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself is the true Lamb of sacrifice who was killed for the sins of people everywhere. Over in the New Testament, it says, “...Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed for us.” (1 Cor. 5:7 NLT) Just as the lamb was killed in place of the firstborn child in each Jewish family, so Jesus died in your place and mine. He took our sins and the penalty of sin – death – upon Himself. The slain lamb became a symbol of liberation for the Jewish people from their slavery in Egypt. But Jesus the Lamb of God liberates you and me from slavery to sin. In a sense, the sacrificial lamb set the Jewish people free to pursue an abundant life in a land of plenty (Canaan), so Jesus the Lamb sets you free to enjoy an abundant life now and then eternity with God forever. The great Passover Feast pointed to Jesus all along and was fulfilled by His death and resurrection.

On a beautiful summer afternoon, a young dad and his daughter were hiking up in the mountains enjoying some time together. As they walked down a trail, they startled a rattlesnake that plunged his fangs into the little girl's leg. She shrieked in terror as the snake slithered off into the tall grass. The girl's dad grabbed the

girl's leg and looked it over. Being miles away from any medical help, he knew that swift action was needed. Pulling a sharp knife from his pocket, he quickly slit across the fang wounds on her leg, bent down and sucked the poison from her leg and spit it out on the ground. He then picked her up and headed for the nearest medical help. After making sure she was OK, he began to feel dizzy and slumped over in the chair he was sitting in. A doctor checked him out and discovered that the snake's poison had made its way into his blood stream through an open sore in the man's mouth. The little girl lived, but her dad died. In a sense, this is what Jesus did for each of us although He did it with the full knowledge of what it would mean for Him. He died so we could live.

THE PERFUME (v. 6-13)

Our second picture or image is of a small jar containing very expensive perfume. Let's read about it now. Bethany was a town close to Jerusalem – sort of like a suburb. Matthew tells us that a man name Simon the Leper was hosting a dinner party for Jesus just days before He was arrested. Apparently, Simon was no longer afflicted with the disease of leprosy; otherwise, he couldn't have hosted such a meal. Perhaps he'd even been healed by Jesus Himself! During the course of this meal, a woman came in and poured the contents of a little bottle over the head of Jesus as he ate. It was filled with a most fragrant and expensive perfume. Its odor probably infiltrated every nook and cranny of Simon's home. Over in the Gospel of John, this woman is identified as Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. You might remember that Lazarus was the man Jesus raised from the dead. Perhaps this was Mary's way of expressing her gratitude to Jesus for raising her brother back to life.

Now the disciples were offended by what Mary did. Why? From their perspective, her act was extravagant to the point of being wasteful. "...'What a waste!' they said. 'It could have been sold for a high price and the money given to the poor.'" (Mt. 26:8-9 NLT) Now, they had a point. In the other Gospel accounts of this story, the value of Mary's perfume was put at 300 denarii which was almost a full year's income for an average working man in that day and time. Now the Internet told me that the average salary in the U.S. last year was \$47,000. When you realize that Mary dumped out on Jesus' head the equivalent of \$40,000 in today's money, you might be better able to appreciate why the disciples had some raised eyebrows! I can hear myself say, "Sure, Mary, we all love Jesus, but don't you think blowing \$40,000 is just a tad bit excessive!" I know myself well enough that I would have reacted just like that. I would have been just as shocked as they were by Jesus' rebuke and His defense of Mary.

This story reveals some things about the people involved. For instance, it tells us something about Jesus' disciples. Their love for Jesus was measured and moderate. Oh, they loved Jesus no doubt, but how did they love Him? It was a moderate love, an exact love, a calculated love, a thoroughly sensible, practical, frugal and rational love for Jesus. I can't speak for you, but all too often that's

just how I express my love. “Yeah, OK, it’s good to love, but let’s not go overboard here and get carried away!” All too often that’s how we love our spouse, our kids, our friends, those who don’t know Jesus yet, and yes, even how we love Jesus. Measured. Moderate. Sensible. Practical. Frugal. “Now, Lord, if I pray this much, go to church this often, give this much money, do this and help that person, then, how much blessing can I expect back from you?” Truth be told, we love others like that all the time. We love Jesus like that much of the time, too. Measured, moderate, sensible, practical, frugal love.

This story also tells us something about Mary. Her love for Jesus was extravagant and excessive. Yes, in that day and time it was considered a courtesy to pour a little perfume on the head of an honored guest as a sign of appreciation, but Mary got completely carried away. And she got carried away with something that cost a great deal of money. That perfume was probably Mary’s greatest financial possession. Nevertheless, there was such a love in her heart for Jesus that Mary just couldn’t hold back. She just dumped the whole bottle all over Jesus’ head!

Frankly, I’m both drawn to and repelled by Mary’s love. After all, there’s a place for moderate, sensible, practical love. You go to work to provide for your family’s needs. You fix meals, wash clothes, and do nice things for people you love. But few of us are fully satisfied by measured and moderate acts of love alone. Take marriage as one example. Sure, we appreciate and value all those routine acts of love and care offered up day in and day out. But once in awhile it’s both fun and healthy when your love for your spouse gets a little wild – a little extravagant and excessive. Just about any marriage could benefit from a little extravagance and excessiveness now and then. It adds some spice and sparkle to an already good relationship.

Now, if that’s true of a human relationship, what about your relationship with God? God is an extravagant, excessive Person! On a clear night you can see about 2,000 stars. Astronomers tell us that there are billions of stars in the universe. Most of them probably no one but God will ever see! God has made over 200,000 kinds of flowers and 9,000 kinds of birds – just excessively extravagant! Sure, God does the routine, practical stuff, but He’s fundamentally an extravagant Being who loves excessively. Just consider this smattering of scriptures! “And this same God who takes care of me will supply all your needs from his glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:19 NLT). “... the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin.” (1 Jo. 1:7 NLT) “... ‘Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.’” (Mt 11:28 NLT) “‘I tell you, you can pray for anything, and if you believe that you’ve received it, it will be yours.’” (Mk 11: 24 NLT) We worship and serve an extravagant, excessive God!

Has it ever occurred to you that because God is fundamentally extravagant and excessive, that He might just value being loved extravagantly and excessively?

Just once in awhile, just occasionally? Do you hear the longing for that kind of love in Jesus' statement, "...'Why criticize this woman for doing such a good thing to me?'" (Mt 26:10 NLT) At that critical and crucial time in His life – already feeling the crushing weight of the cross upon His life – Jesus needed, appreciated and received an act of extravagant, excessive love.

Could anyone accuse you of loving Jesus in an extravagant, reckless or crazy kind of way? Make no mistake, there's everything right about maintaining all the daily, routine patterns of a relationship with Jesus – prayer, reading the Bible, going to church. But do you ever go beyond that and do something a little on the wild side just because you love Jesus? "Rick, what does that look like?" That's a fair question. As I think about this story, it occurs to me that one important way to show extravagant love for God is to show extravagant love for others. The Holy Spirit will prompt you to love Jesus by loving others. Reach out to a visitor – a complete stranger - today. Send a check to someone in need. Make a phone call. Write a letter or an e-mail. Visit a discouraged friend. Mary's love seized the moment. There was something about her love here that's spontaneous and impulsive. Mary didn't sit down and plan out this act of love. I'm convinced that God presents us with daily opportunities to love others with Jesus' love in spontaneous, impulsive ways that might just seem a tad extravagant. But we have a tendency to talk ourselves out of those opportunities, don't we? To seize the opportunity to touch someone else's life is one way to love Jesus. Watch out! Be alert! That opportunity may come to you before you leave this building today.

This story also tells us something important about Jesus. Why did Jesus say, "I tell you the truth, wherever the Good News is preached throughout the world, this woman's deed will be remembered and discussed"? (Mt. 26:13 NLT) When Mary broke that bottle and poured out her expensive perfume all over Jesus' head, she was illustrating the extravagant, excessive love of Jesus Himself. In a few days, He would willingly subject Himself to injustice, torture, insults and a degrading death on a cross. Here was an illustration of Jesus and His love for you and me. Just as Mary poured out the perfume, Jesus poured out His expensive, precious, costly blood for you and me at the cross of Calvary. How does the Bible put it? "But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners." (Rom 5:8 NLT)

THE COINS (v. 14-16)

The final image involves those coins Judas Iscariot collected for betraying Jesus. Why did Judas do it – betray Jesus? Some say he just wanted the money. But thirty silver coins was no great amount of money even back then. Some say Judas had become disillusioned with Jesus. Perhaps he expected Jesus to expel the Romans and liberate the Jewish people from political tyranny. Then when it became clear Jesus had other intentions, Judas' disillusionment turned to hatred. Still others say Judas never intended Jesus to die at all. Instead, they suggest Judas was trying to force Jesus' hand – to get Him to reveal Himself as

the savior of Israel and to ignite a successful rebellion against the Romans. We really don't know Judas' motivations.

But here's something of which we can be certain. Jesus can fully identify with any of us who have been betrayed by those closest to us in life. Nothing hurts quite like betrayal. Bronco Nagerski was a tough running back for the Chicago Bears football team back in the 1930s. During one especially brutal game, Nagerski broke four tackles on the way to the goal line, hit the goal post, spun around and ran into the brick wall just beyond the end zone. Dazed and wobbly, he hobbled back to the huddle and said, "Boy, that last guy sure hit me hard!" Betrayal is like being blind-sided by a brick wall. When you least expect it, BAM! And it's usually someone you've trusted – that's why it hurts so very much. I simply want you to remember that God can identify with the pain of being betrayed by a spouse, having a friend break your trust or having someone close to you hurt you in a way that's beyond words. Jesus has been there and He is able to bring healing to your hurt if we bring it to Him for healing.

Here was Judas' biggest mistake whatever his motives might have been. He refused to accept Jesus as He was and tried to make Jesus into who he wanted Jesus to be. There's a lesson there for you and me. It isn't Jesus who needs to adjust or adapt Himself to you. You need to adjust and adapt yourself to Jesus. You can never use Jesus to fulfill your own plans and purposes in life. You need to submit yourself to His plans and purpose. That's what Jesus being the Lord of your life is all about. The ultimate tragedy of Judas is of a person who thought he knew better than God. He's not the first or last person to make that mistake! We meet three very different people in our text today: Caiaphas who hated Jesus, Mary who loved Jesus and Judas who betrayed Jesus. I'd like to focus on Mary in closing today. Is that kind of extravagant, excessive love truly possible today?

Eight times the Ministry of Education in formerly Communist East Germany said no to Uwe Holmer's children when they tried to enroll at the university in East Berlin. The Ministry of Education didn't usually give reasons for its rejection of applications for enrollment. But in this case the reason wasn't hard to guess. Uwe Holmer, the father of the eight applicants, was a Lutheran pastor in a suburb of East Berlin. For 26 years the Ministry of Education was headed by Margot Honecker, the wife of then East Germany's premier, Erich Honecker. When the Berlin Wall came down, Erich and Margot Honecker were unceremoniously dismissed from office. He was indicted for criminal activities during his tenure as premier. The Honeckers were evicted from their luxurious palace in an exclusive suburb of palatial homes reserved for the VIPs in the East German Communist party. The Honeckers suddenly found themselves friendless, without resources, and with no place to go. None of their former cronies showed them any of the humanitarianism Communists boast about. No one wanted to identify with or help the Honeckers.

Enter Uwe Holmer. Remembering the words of Jesus, "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also," Holmer extended an invitation to the Honeckers to stay with his family in the parsonage of the church he served. Forgiveness is a central value of his Christian faith. No person was excluded from that - not even the Honeckers, who had made life so hard for his family for so many years. "Jesus would also have not have turned [them] down," Uwe Holmer said. The Honeckers stayed with Holmer and his family for just a little over two months in 1990. Pastor Holmer never reported that the Honeckers renounced their atheism and professed faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord. But at least they folded their hands and bowed their heads when the family prayed together. The Honeckers eventually immigrated to Chile. Erich is dead now, but Margot is still alive. I was blessed and intrigued to discover that she still writes the Holmers a letter every Christmas. Who knows what the Holmers' extravagant, excessive love will lead to in the end?

Look with me at the cross! It's the greatest symbol of God's extravagant, excessive love. Aren't you glad today that Jesus' love for you was anything but routine, anything but measured and anything but moderate? It was anything but rational and practical. Let me ask you as I ask myself today, "Does your love ever get extravagant or excessive for Jesus?"