

# Extravagant Love\*

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In Luke 7: 36—50 there is a story, found with variations in all four gospels, of an expression of extravagant love for Christ by a woman, a woman with a certain reputation in town, who came to dinner uninvited and anointed his head or his feet with tears or myrrh, and in Luke and John wiped his feet with her hair.

The story is presented as a lesson Our Lord taught about the Jubilee legislation in Deut. 15, in which every seventh year all debts would be forgiven, all slaves released and all property revert to its original owners (probably a greater challenge to the excesses of capitalism than anything Karl Marx ever said or wrote). Deuteronomy stresses that this should not be an excuse to fail to help the poor in the land when the Jubilee year approaches. Deuteronomy claims that there would be no poor in the land if all Israel obeyed God and all his commandments; but the truth is, Deuteronomy goes on, you will always have the poor with you in the land; therefore, open wide your hand to the poor and needy. Those in the gospel story who apparently knew the law in Deuteronomy quite well were the indignant disciples in Mark and Matthew, Simon the Pharisee in Luke, and Judas in John's gospel. They were offended by the woman's apparent extravagance, and especially this woman's extravagance, seeing who she was.

As in reading all biblical passages, we must keep in mind two principles: we must always theologize whenever we first read a passage, that is first ask what it indicates God has done and was doing, and then moralize, or ask what it indicates we should do; secondly, we should always be conscious of who in the story or passage we find ourselves identifying with.

The 'liberal' response to the woman's deed, precisely the response to those who knew Deuteronomy, was that it was a waste for her to do it and that the expense of it should have gone to help the poor. Unfortunately John's gospel brackets Judas, calling him a thief and callous towards the poor, making it difficult for us to identify with him. But let it not be an occasion, either, for the conservative in us to rejoice in seeing a do-gooder get his come-uppance! God has always, since the world began, had both liberals and conservatives to work with; each provides countervailing forces for God to work with and for the good of all. Christians with a

strong conscience do not need to put down the convictions and work of others. What a wonderful day it will be when we get off each other's case and work on God's!

Jesus' response in all four gospels is that the woman's act should be seen as an act of love, for she was spending in advance what would later be spent, without such a question being put, in order to anoint his body at death. In three of the accounts Jesus then cites the Jubilee legislation in Deut. 15:11 that because human society is basically sinful there will always be poor in the land; the rest of that verse reads, 'Therefore, I command you, open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and the poor in the land.' This woman, very much in need of forgiveness, nonetheless provides for the whole church a beautiful example of the kind of love of God with all the heart, soul and might that is commanded also in Deuteronomy (6:4) in the *Shema* and which Jesus himself emphasized in the double commandment: love of God and love of neighbour, both together, not just one or the other for both constitute the essence of Torah. (We shall be looking at just how Jesus did that in a moment.) The story of this woman's act of love is concluded in Mark and Matthew with Jesus' saying that whenever the gospel is preached in all the world this story about her extravagant love will be told 'in memory of her'.

Luke also draws attention to the Jubilee legislation in Deut. 15 but in a way different from the other gospels. In the jubilee year, whether every seventh year or every fiftieth year, all debts were to be forgiven; that is the reason for the admonition to be openly generous to the poor even though the jubilee year might be approaching when their debts would be forgiven and creditors might be tempted to be stingy. In the Lucan account Jesus tells a parable about a creditor who, when the jubilee year came, forgave one debtor 500 denarii and another 50. The crucial question Jesus then put to Simon the Pharisee was which one would love the creditor more, and Simon of course answered: the one who was forgiven the greater debt. Jesus thereupon declared a Jubilee forgiveness for all the woman's sins for she had loved *polu*, 'greatly', the RSV translates it, or perhaps 'many', for she had had many lovers just as the one debtor had owed many denarii.

This story in Luke 7 immediately brings to mind a similar one a few chapters later, in ch. 10, which we call the Good Samaritan Parable. I am convinced that Luke was a teaching elder as well as a preacher of the first order. Upon conversions new Christians would undergo a programme of instruction in the young churches of the first century, and in Luke's congregation I am convinced that meant reading Scripture, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. That was the only Scripture the early church had aside from the various traditions they received about the life and ministry of Jesus. Luke was constantly rooting these stories about Jesus in Scripture, showing how it was the same God who created the world and chose ancient Israel as his servant church who was working in

and through Christ. The literate members of the congregation would read portions of Scripture aloud for the sake of the majority who were illiterate so that everybody could understand what was going on in the real world God loves so much. The following is a fresh translation of the Good Samaritan passage (Lk 10: 25–37). It also deals with the question of loving both God and neighbour.

Then a certain lawyer, in order to test him, stood and said, ‘Teacher, what should I do that I may inherit eternal life?’ Jesus answered him, ‘What is written in the Torah and how do you read it?’ Then he answered, saying, ‘Love the Lord your God out of all your heart, and with all your soul and all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself’ (the famous combination of phrases from Deut. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18). Jesus said to him, ‘You have answered correctly; do this and you shall live.’ But in order to justify himself (i.e. do a righteous deed for himself), he replied to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbour?’

Responding, Jesus said, ‘A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among thieves who stripped him and mugged him, leaving him half dead. It so happened that a priest going down the same road saw him but avoided him. Similarly, a levite happening by the same place, saw him and also avoided him.

But a travelling Samaritan came upon him and, seeing him, had compassion and going to him bound up his wounds, treating him with oil and wine, put him upon his own animal and led him to an inn and cared for him. On the morrow he took two denarii and gave them to the inn-keeper saying, ‘Take care of him and whatever you spend in addition I shall reimburse you upon my return.’

Which of these three seems to you to have been neighbour to the one who had fallen among thieves?’ The lawyer answered, ‘The one who showed him grace’ (*eleos*, the LXX word for *hesed*). Jesus then said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’

The lawyer’s two questions were moralizing ones, just as the disciples’ question about the woman’s extravagant adoration of Jesus was a moralizing one. ‘Why not sell the myrrh for three hundred denarii and give it to the poor?’ ‘What shall I do so that I may inherit eternal life?’ (See the same question put again in Lk 18:18.) ‘Who is my neighbour that I may love him or her?’ The tendency to ask what we should do *before* celebrating what God has done is shared by liberals and conservatives alike. We all tend to moralize before we theologize. If conservatives appear to celebrate the gospel a bit more than liberals, they usually then moralize right away about how only they do it right. It is a normal and

sinful human tendency to moralize right away, that is, focus on what we should do.

The brilliant, prophetic, wisdom teacher from the Galilee turns the lawyer's question on its head. Merrill Miller has recently pointed out that the lawyer's question was a non-question; there was really no question actually about community identity and who one's neighbour was in that context: it was a fellow Jew. Lev. 19, from which the second great commandment derives, makes it abundantly clear. In our context of a shrinking global village there can be no such limited view of community identity. The lawyer's question reflects the same attitude as that of the indignant disciples in Mark and Matthew: to whom may *I* do a good deed, to whom may *I* show love? Excellent questions, but they should always follow a fresh recital and celebration of God's love first, in order to recall in every new context what true love is and how it is done. I am convinced that Paul was not pitting faith against works in Romans or elsewhere. His question, rather, was 'In whose works do you have faith, God's or your own?' (Romans 10:3).

What Jesus did, then, was tell a parable, in answer to the moralizing question, that by dynamic analogy made the lawyer identify with the hated outsider Samaritan who, as he had to admit, was the one who showed that divine grace which humans in Scripture rarely but occasionally also practised, like the good Samaritans in 2 Chron 28:15, on which I am sure the Good Samaritan parable depends. We all identify with some one or thing in hearing a story, even if unconsciously. The lawyer could not, if his intention was, as Luke says, to justify himself (i.e. do a righteous deed for himself), identify with those who failed to show grace to the fellow Jew, to their community-identifiable neighbour. Let us now hear this rarely read and almost totally overlooked report about the good Samaritans in 2 Chron 28.

It comes at the point in history of the defeat of Judah in the eighth century BCE by the allied armies of Syria and Northern Israel. It is interpreted in the passage as God's judgment against Judah for prior sins. But the passage focuses on how the victorious northern Israelites are about to take Judahite captives back to their home in Samaria to make slaves of them. The prophet, Obed, challenges them: while God has indeed judged the Judahites for past sins, God's wrath against Israel will be all the greater if they make their brothers the Judahite slaves. Four of the Samaritans heeded the prophet and did four acts of mercy or grace to their captives; they clothed them, fed them, poured oil on their wounds, and put the weak on their own animals to take them to Jericho, a city of refuge. I would suggest, by the way, that no first-century Jew or Christian, upon hearing Our Lord's parable of the Good Samaritan, would have failed to think about that story. Who is my neighbour? asked the lawyer. In the story in Chronicles the Israelites from Samaria and the Judahites were not only neighbours but, though enemies in that war, were also brothers. Our Lord in

the parable widens the circle even further by saying the hated Samaritan was the one who moralized rightly and did the act of grace. The lawyer could not object and say that it was just a story and that no Samaritan would do such a wonderful thing. Why? Because of its Scriptural base. By the way, the OT has a number of examples on how to begin to practise Our Lord's command to love the enemy.

We might well ask why commentaries never read the parable in Luke 10 in the light of 2 Chron 28. The base answer is general Christian ignorance of Scripture, but the baser answer might be that of Christian supersessionism; the NT is supposed to be superior to the Old in such matters, therefore how could we possibly suggest that Jesus cribbed from the OT? Such an attitude derives directly from a christocentric interpretation of Scripture. A theocentric interpretation would lead us to see that Jesus, as well as Luke after him, taught from Scripture. Why? If you really want to know what God is doing now it would be well to learn what God had done in earlier contexts and then discern by dynamic analogy what is really going on in the new context.

The crucial question in the Lucan parable is that of Our Lord to the Pharisaic lawyer, 'What is written in Torah and how do you read it?' *How* we read Scripture makes all the difference in the world as to what we see written in it. I suggest that the gospels give ample evidence that Our Lord himself was the one who taught the disciples that crucial difference, so that they could indeed go and read likewise. If we read understanding God as Creator of all peoples as well as Redeemer through Israel and through Christ I suggest we would cease all our tendencies to retribalize God, making of God's precious son our in-group idol, and hence practising our various forms of anti-semitism, racism, sexism, denominationalism and exclusivism. We tribalize God every time we call others 'bad guys' or attempt to hide our forms of injustice behind a policy of anti-communism.

I recently challenged about twenty orthodox Jewish advanced students of talmud at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem to prove to me that Jews monotheize any better than Christians. In some ways I think perhaps they do, but my point was that nobody really monotheizes well but that we must all, Muslims, Christians and Jews, learn to do so, for at least two reasons. First, the Bible and Our Lord command us Christians to do so; and second, if we don't there may be no planet earth on which we may finally become obedient stewards and tenants of that which has been entrusted to us. The Bible can be a power house of enablement to counter the world's threat to self-destruction for those who have heard 'the high calling of God in Christ Jesus'. Let us be God's Church Expectant by listening to God's prophetic or challenging voice through this Bible; and that we can and must now finally do by reading it on its own terms—if we are to be the faithful, called people of God. The Bible chastens ere it edifies; it challenges ere it comforts.

The various disciples, in the different gospel accounts, who were

indignant at the woman's extravagance in doing to Jesus while he was still alive what would have been perfectly acceptable at his death, as a part of funeral custom, needed to learn from her that it is alright to love God first and then love the neighbour, the poor, the orphan, the widow, the sojourner, the dispossessed, the outcast and the powerless, with the same kind and intensity of love. How great must have been the yearning on the part of Christians in the early churches, frightened, scared, facing persecution, indeed powerless, to have had the opportunity the complaining disciples had had, to pour out their adoration on Christ, this most precious of all God's gifts, and yet for them the reason for their own sufferings precisely because they loved him. And who is it in the gospel account that represents for them the fulfilment of those yearnings? A used and probably abused woman. And it is not just Luke, this time, that early feminist, who makes the point. If they yearned to have the opportunity in memory, in reading Scripture, to love him and adore him the way in their hearts they must have yearned in order to become and remain Christian in the first century, they had to identify with this woman. In Luke's form of the parable the woman is the town whore; and in John's gospel she is the questionable Mary. Here the Hosea-Gomer analogy (Hosea 1:2 and 3:1) is turned around: there the town whore, Gomer, represented Israel's unfaithfulness; here this woman is the one in the whole gospel account who had loved many but loved Christ 'greatly' (*polu*) and hence whose faith-put-into-practice was her salvation (Luke 7: 47—50). To moralize on reading that without first theologizing would mean that we might best become the town sinner so that we can do it right. Obviously absurd. Some day, God willing, the church will learn to theologize first and then moralize thereafter.

And that is what Jesus and the evangelists in the gospels were in effect trying to get the early Christians to do. In Luke Jesus chides Simon, the Pharisee, his host, by then saying to him, 'You see this woman? When I entered your house, you did not give me water for my feet, but she has moistened my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You did not give me a greeting kiss; but she from when she entered has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with myrrh. For this reason, I tell you her many sins are forgiven, because she has loved greatly. But one for whom little is forgiven, loves little.' He then said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven' (thereby granting her her Jubilee release). Then those seated at table with him began to ask among themselves who this was who even forgave sins. Then he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace'.

If the good folk in Luke's congregation wanted so much to love Jesus, they had to identify with the sinful woman in the story. To identify with the respectable folk in the parable would but increase the pain that they, living after he had gone, could not give him water for his feet, give him the welcoming kiss of peace, or anoint his head and feet with oil. Who had the

opportunity to do so when he was here? they would have asked. And did they do it?

No. Not the respectable folk. No, not even the chosen liberal Galileans. They moralized on the spot first, all of them. Then who did? Tell us who did really love him so that we may at least vicariously do so ourselves in hearing the story. I'll tell who did, Luke told his congregation. It was one who loved extravagantly, one whose many sins were forgiven because of that love in faith. It is alright to love him first. And one of the reasons it is alright is that then our love of neighbour and even of enemy will be all the more valid and effective. But that love must not be idolatrous; that love must never forget that it is love of God in Christ, love of God's Christ, not love of our Christ, as though of our idol.

Now, having seen the first of the double commandment movingly demonstrated, what of the second? Who of all those back then when he was here, who showed how to love the neighbour? Did not the indignant disciples, and even Simon the Pharisee, have at least a point? Of course, they did, Luke might have answered. We are not given just the one commandment; there is also the second, which is equal to it, just as Jesus said it was. Well, can you tell us about that now? Sure, Luke might have answered, and he taught them about that by telling of Jesus' teaching on a passage in 2 Chron 28. Was it also the sinful woman? No, Luke would have responded, this time it was a hated foreigner, a Samaritan who showed the way. Samaritans, remember, also had the Torah as their Scripture. We will know what we should do, when the time comes, if we first take time, in the new context in which we ask the question, to celebrate the gospel story of what God has done, in creation and redemption, to show us true love, right here in the ambiguity of our reality, to show us God's Oneness, God's integrity, right here in the midst of our human splendour and squalor.

And why do we have to keep hearing Our Lord ask, 'What is written ... and how do you read it?' every time we want to do something for our salvation? Because we are human. We slip into idolatry as a natural human tendency; we all do. Morning by morning we need to be on our knees, as individuals and as the church, to pray once more and again to be plugged into the Integrity of Reality, so that we have a chance each day to work our way through life's ambiguities. For *each day is a gift*, another chance, to strain forward and to press on, as Paul said to his congregation at Philippi, to fulfil the mission in this high calling of God in Christ Jesus as witnesses to *God's own extravagant love*, not only for us but for all his beloved creation, and not just for those who agree with us politically or theologically. Should not our love of God and of our global neighbours, as our witness to God's love, be at least as extravagant?

- Professor Sanders initially delivered this as a sermon on 15 March 1986 at the Denver Colorado session of the newly reunited American Presbyterian Church's General Assembly Council. It has been slightly adapted.