

Beautiful service

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Several years ago I taught a Sunday School class on the Saint John's Bible, a beautiful hand-calligraphed and illustrated version of the Bible that took several years and a whole team of artists to create. I showed the class a video about how the project came together, and the class was spellbound, as I knew they'd be. The illuminations make you want to lean into the scripture. The Saint John's Bible fosters awe and wonder toward the God who gives us not only the sacred story but also the artists who make it come alive.

Near the end of the video, the narrator shares the cost of this tremendous project--which numbered in the millions of dollars. And in an instant, the mood in the room shifted, from awe at the holiness of the gift to alarm at the extravagant price tag.

*Why was the money wasted in this way? This money could have been given to the poor.*

It was as profound a case of spiritual whiplash as one's likely to see, outside of Martha's house all those hundreds of years ago, when her sister poured out a bottle of expensive perfume on Jesus' feet and the chattering class went ballistic. If Jesus had been in my Sunday School class, he might have said, "Let these artists alone; why do you trouble them? They have performed a good service for me."

All four gospels have an anointing story. The synoptics differ from John's version in several key details: the head, not the feet; an unnamed woman rather than Mary. In Mark's version, Jesus praises the anointing as a "beautiful thing." Jesus might as well

use that phrase here in John too--it's clear how much the gesture touches him. While the disciples carp about the price tag, how can they miss what it means to Jesus, just days away from the cross?

We don't talk about beauty a lot in my tradition. We talk about mission and worship and education, all good and worthy things. We talk about being of service to God. But here Jesus lifts up an extravagant act of service and says, *This is beautiful*.

I've been working with NEXT Church, a movement within the Presbyterian Church (USA), for many years. Our focus is on envisioning "the church that is becoming," which we hope and expect will be more relational, more diverse, more collaborative, more hopeful, and more agile than in generations past. It will be a church more willing to take risks, to try new things, and potentially to fail.

Not surprisingly, people are drawn to the risk/failure message much more in theory than in reality. We know intellectually that a complex world requires a church that's willing to innovate, and that not every innovation will bear fruit. But the fact is, failure hurts. It's hard to pour your heart and soul into an initiative that doesn't yield the results you hoped for. And of course, there's the matter of stewardship.

As a pastor who used to serve a small church on a shoestring budget, I understand the struggle not to be reckless with the time and treasure entrusted to us. That's no small concern. Our church's session had many conversations about our manse--unoccupied and in disrepair--and what to do with it. Do we fix it up and rent it out at market value, which will provide income to allow us to expand some of our ministries? Or do we offer it as low-income housing as a way of living our values and providing direct benefit to a family in our community? Both were seen as faithful options.

How do we keep concerns over stewardship from derailing the risky, adventurous spirit the church needs? John's story offers some assistance. Judas, we're told, doesn't really want to help the poor; he wants to line his own pockets. He is interested in security, not service.

And perhaps that's the key: an inward, insular focus can never be truly beautiful, because it serves only ourselves. Mary's act of reckless devotion is a beautiful thing. But selling the perfume and giving it to the poor could also be a beautiful thing. (Didn't Jesus ask the rich young ruler to do just that?) As Paul Tillich said, "The history of humankind is the history of men and women who wasted themselves and

were not afraid to do so. They did not fear to waste themselves in the service of a new creation."

Are we serving the new creation, or our sense of security? That's the question.