

Date: March 28, 2003

SUNDAY: Lent 5

SERMON: Uncalculated Love

Text(s): Philippians 3:4-14; John 12:1-8

© 2004 L. R. Kalajainen

One sign that we live in strange and dangerous times came to light in an article in this week's issue of *Time* magazine. Apparently, in the wake of 9/11, a company that used to specialize in making computer models of natural disasters like hurricanes to calculate insurance risks has become *the* place where the Department of Homeland Security, as well as insurance companies, and municipal government leaders and federal disaster agencies have been turning to get information on the risks we actually face from terrorist attacks. The company has created a vast database which can summon up models of more than 300,000 scenarios of terrorist attacks—where they're most likely to occur and what the human and material costs would be under a variety of kinds of attacks—everything from car bombs to nuclear or bio-chemical weapons of mass destruction.

It's perhaps, a sign of the strangeness of our times, that virtually everything that touches on our lives can, with the help of computers, be developed into a model where results can be projected, costs quantified, and risks assessed. Not that knowing those things would make it any easier for those who are the victims or survivors of such contemplated disasters; dead is dead, bereaved is bereaved, traumatized is traumatized. But at least we'll know how much to expect our insurance premiums to go up and, we can always hope, these models of calculated risks may give our counter-terrorism efforts an edge in preventing future attacks.

There is one area of our lives, however, where such computer-models and risk calculations don't seem to apply—where we just have to operate in an arena of uncalculated risk, and that is in our relationships, and particularly in the case of that most wonderful, mysterious, troublesome, exasperating, and fascinating thing

we call love. As any lover knows, there's no explaining love, much less calculating it, and certainly no protection from its risks. Which is probably why there is so little of the real thing around, and why novelists and poets and moviemakers never tire of exploring it.

If you saw the movie, *Shadowlands*, where Anthony Hopkins played C. S. Lewis, you saw a very convincing portrayal of the uncalculated risks that we take if we let love into our lives.

Lewis was the stereotype of the Oxford don, a confirmed bachelor until he was nearly sixty, brilliant scholar of a rather esoteric subject—Medieval and Renaissance literature, better known as a popular apologist for Christianity, and particularly, one who could make an intellectually-defensible case for Christian faith. And then he met Joy Davidman.

Joy, an American writer and poet who had come to England to work for a few years, was a passionate, emotional person, who swept dry old Lewis off his feet, and made him fall head over heels in love like a schoolboy. Stranger that he was to his own feelings, he didn't even know he was in love, or at least couldn't bring himself to entertain the notion. She wanted to stay in England to pursue her writing career, but couldn't because of the immigration laws. Lewis decided that he would help her out by entering into a marriage of convenience, lending her his name so that she could legally stay and work in England. He kept telling himself that there was nothing but a business arrangement involved. But the business arrangement turned into something else—a profound love affair. But just as the springtime of romance was blooming, the winter of tragedy howled into their lives with an Arctic blast of pain. Joy was stricken with an inoperable cancer. While she was in the hospital, Lewis began to discover just how deeply he loved this woman. In one of the most touching scenes in the movie, he decides to make the business arrangement a true marriage. And we saw how much a person will risk for love. Knowing that his beloved has cancer, knowing that, short of a miracle, he is

almost certainly going to lose her in a few months at best, knowing that she will not blame him if he puts his feelings on hold and keeps their relationship on the businesslike footing it's been on, he chooses to accept the risk that always accompanies true love. He marries her in a Christian ceremony in the hospital room, with eyes open to the price in pain and grief he will inevitably have to pay for coming out of his academic ivory tower and opening his heart to love.

Love is always a risky business. Not only the love between lovers, though that is one of the places we most commonly experience the risks of love, but in any relationship of love into which we enter, there are huge risks that we take. For to really love someone we have to become vulnerable. We have to open ourselves to the possibility that our love may not be requited, or that, the one we love will do something to hurt us deeply, or that we may lose the one we love. We risk giving up parts of ourselves that we cherish; we have to learn to put another's interests and needs ahead of our own. And that's risky to open ourselves up like that. No one likes pain, but when we love, truly love, someone, we open ourselves to the risk of pain. And there's just no way to calculate that risk. No way to quantify how much pain we may be in for. In fact, as anyone who has truly loved knows, any attempt to introduce calculations into love is certain to sabotage it and make it disappear.

In our gospel lesson this morning, we see someone who understands that truth about love very well and someone who doesn't understand it at all. John's gospel is the only one where we find the story of Jesus' raising his close friend, Lazarus of Bethany from the dead. In fact, in this gospel, unlike the others, it is that act, rather than the disturbance with the money-changers in the Temple, that precipitates Jesus' arrest and condemnation. The story in our lesson this morning follows directly on that the story of the raising of Lazarus, and in John's version it is not

some anonymous woman who anoints Jesus' feet with costly ointment, as it is in the versions in Matthew and Mark, but Mary of Bethany, the sister of the now-resurrected Lazarus, and also one of Jesus' closest friends.

Jesus comes to visit not long before his own crucifixion, and Mary, in a defining moment that brings her love and devotion into sharp focus for all subsequent readers and hearers of the story, takes a container of costly ointment, spikenard, and begins to anoint Jesus' feet. It's not the act of anointing his feet which attracts attention. Foot-washing was the conventional signal in the ancient Near East of hospitality and welcome. Nothing unusual. No, it was that costly, rare perfumed ointment, spikenard, that makes this story what it is. That was not conventional hospitality. In fact, it wasn't associated with hospitality at all. If one was wealthy enough to afford spikenard, and one had to be reasonably well off, since the value of the ointment Mary used was the equivalent of 300 days wages for a common day laborer, one didn't waste it by pouring it on the dusty feet of a houseguest, regardless of how good a friend he might be. One bought spikenard for that most important of all events, the death of a loved one. It was an ointment used in embalming a body. One put aside the money and saved it up till there was enough to buy this last, poignant testimony to a love that was severed by the visitation of the grim reaper. One didn't squander it on the living.

So it's hardly surprising that Judas complains about the extravagance of Mary's gesture of love. John gives us a brief look ahead in his story by reminding us that Judas is the one who will shortly betray Jesus to his enemies for money. John really has no sympathy for Judas at all, no portrayal of him as a man torn between two loyalties or a zealot hoping to push Jesus into inciting an open rebellion against the hated Romans, as he has often been portrayed in the movies. No, John just dismisses him as a sleazy embezzler who was feathering his own nest at the

expense of his friends and companions. Judas was just looking out for Number One, he's portrayed as one who would never do anything without calculating the risk, calculating the advantage to himself. So it's understandable that he should be upset by so extravagant a gesture. What a waste! He tries to cloak his real motives under a guise of pious concern for the poor. "What a shame this precious ointment was wasted like this," he says hypocritically, "we could have sold it and fed a lot of poor people with the proceeds." But Jesus won't allow this self-serving criticism of what he recognizes as a pure act of love. "*You always have the poor with you, Judas,*" he says. "*But you do not always have me. Mary knows this; she bought it to keep it for the day of my burial, and that's why she's done this beautiful thing.*"

The extravagant risk-taking of love will always be a mystery to the Judases of this world. Calculations are fine for budgets and spreadsheets and cash flow analyses. An investment banker or financial controller of a corporation wouldn't last very long if he or she ignored the risks rather than make careful calculations of the risks with a generous measure of prudence. (It's why church program committees and church finance committees often see things very differently.) The problem is, that so often, we can't leave the calculations in the office where they belong; we carry that sound business practice over into our personal relationships, with disastrous results. Loving relationships are built on trust, on commitment, on self-giving without limits. Prudence in business is necessary; in relationships, it's deadly. Prudence and love are incompatible. In order to love, one has to throw caution and self-respect and prudence to the winds. One has to be ready "to bet the farm," so to speak..

We belong to the most modern, technologically-advanced society in history; we have access to virtually limitless information; we have conquered and tamed nearly every square inch on the surface of the earth; we have probed

into the vast mysteries of outer space and the equally vast mysteries the inner space of molecular biology; we have become like gods in our knowledge of good and evil; yet we remain some of the loneliest, most alienated beings imaginable. Our friendships are few, our marriages dry and barren, our family relationships dysfunctional, and our interior lives a frozen wasteland. We know how to search for life on Mars; but we don't know how to live the life we already have as loving persons. We know how to clone living cells, but we don't know how to build and maintain intimacy with one another. It is difficult for us to give ourselves over to the sheer extravagance of love, what T.S. Eliot called, *The awful daring of a moment's surrender, Which an age of prudence can never retract.*"

Such "awful daring" moments of surrender to the extravagance of love always look foolish or wasteful to the actuarial Judases looking on. It doesn't make for a tidy bottom line on the balance sheet. It *is* wasteful. It *is* extravagant. It's love. It is self-giving to the highest degree. That's what love is all about— rising above ourselves, beyond ourselves, forgetting about self and giving ourselves wholly to the one who is the object of our attachment.

So Mary throws prudence to the winds, and doesn't count the cost, and pours all of her heart's love and all of her undying gratitude on the dusty feet of this friend who has given her such a great gift, the gift of her brother's life. Calculations be damned. And it is this extravagant gesture of love that catches our throats and tugs at our heartstrings and burns itself into our memories. What a large soul this Mary of Bethany is!

How did her soul get so large that she could love so extravagantly and without calculation of the cost? I suspect that one of the lessons she'd learned from Jesus was that she herself was loved extravagantly by God. I think it's the same lesson St. Paul learned and of which

he speaks in our epistle lesson. After reciting all the calculations of self-worth that make up his impressive pedigree, he says, *“But whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss . . . for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. . . I regard all these things as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ, and be found in him . . .”*

The extravagance of love that Mary and Paul learned, and which we need to learn, comes when we, like them, realize that we have been loved extravagantly. *“Herein is love,”* says Paul, *“while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”* Who can understand and plumb the mysteries of love like that? It’s not particularly easy to accept such extravagant love; we’d prefer to earn it, to deserve it, to merit it by our good behavior or worthy character, by our virtuous life. But we can’t. We were loved extravagantly long before we came squalling, red-faced and kicking, into this world. We could do nothing to deserve such love. We can only accept the fact that as Lady Julian of Norwich wrote so long ago, *“Before ever God made us, he loved us. . . God’s love had no beginning; in this love we had our beginning.”*

When that fundamental datum of our existence really gets inside us, then we will begin to learn how to love others without calculation as well. And when we learn to love one another as God loves us, extravagantly, prodigally, we will discover that we have pitched our tents inside the very gates of heaven.