



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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## Holy Restraint and Holy Abundance

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 13, 2016*

*The Fifth Sunday in Lent—Based on John 12:1-8*

The 40 days and 40 nights of Lent are coming to an end, far sooner than usual. How are you doing? Has it been a good time of restraint? Have you pulled off the targeted, self-imposed restraint that we encourage this season? Have you, perhaps, lived into the irony that doing less, saying less, consuming less promises to give you more? This is not more stuff and busyness, but more space: space to get a clearer view of what really matters, what is true and beautiful and good. You make space in Lent so that you can distinguish the wheat from the chaff, the ore from the dirt, and the truth from the lies. It's a time to declutter your spiritual house, to make a place for God, your neighbor, and your true self. If you haven't started this restraint, there's still time. And if you have, then you don't have much time left!

I don't know about you, but for me this time of holy restraint has been significantly overshadowed by being in the thick of another season: the contest for the presidency of this nation. And I am no expert as to whether this is new or just another iteration of our history, but this political season has been marked by a certain lack of restraint, in multiple political directions, that has me transfixed. Because so many "windows" are being smashed, right and left. Political theorists have a new word for this: They call it the "Overton window." It's a political theory in which at any given moment there is a range of policies and things you can say that are considered politically acceptable. You are "in the window" when you are considered sensible and acceptable by most of the people in the crowd. But you are "outside the Overton window" as a politician when you move beyond the mainstream of popularity, and your ideas are seen as radical and unthinkable. In most cases, when a politician or a leader, or even a clergyperson, goes "outside the Overton window," their career is troubled, if not over. And yet, I don't know if you've noticed, but there are people who have broken through what we thought was that window who are thriving politically. It seems that the boundary of that window has shifted, and now we are figuring out what can be said and can be done with a new landscape of restraint. We are witnessing a new map being drawn that portrays the bounds of our nation's behavior in our time.

But, again, this redrawing of the map is nothing new. Jesus' people had their "Overton window," and Jesus sought to break through it, not for any kind of political control, but to bring his people and the whole world closer to God. What was the radical and unthinkable idea that put him beyond the window? There were many, but his most vivid conviction was when the Gospels tell us "he began to set his face toward Jerusalem," and he tells the disciples that he would die there. He alluded that there was much more to it than that. That there would be a "raising up on the third day" that would change everything. But the disciples didn't want to listen. Even rock-solid Peter couldn't stomach the thought. "No, Lord. Let's not court disaster in Jerusalem. Let's set up shop in Galilee on Mount Tabor, the Mount of Transfiguration. Remember how sublime that was?" Even Peter wanted to keep Jesus within the mainstream picture of what a leader is. "Leaders aren't losers; they are winners. Leaders aren't killed; they are the ones who triumph over the enemy. A Messiah doesn't die a shameful death; a Messiah would rout the Romans, topple the Emperor himself, liberate the Jews from bondage, and then, just like Elijah, he'd never die. He'd fly up to heaven riding a chariot of fire, waving back to the Israel he had made great again!"

But no, that's not the plan. Jesus is going to find a kind of greatness by breaking through not the glass ceiling, but by breaking the glass bottom of the boat, seeming to sink their entire movement at the Place of the Skull. The

movement isn't going to sink, but it would take an extraordinary imagination to think of a scenario where that movement could survive Jesus' death. Even when Jesus makes it to Jerusalem, to the suburb of Bethany, six days before his Last Supper, the disciples are still hoping for the mainstream Messiah that they've dreamed about since childhood.

But Mary of Bethany, Jesus' dear friend, she gets it. She is not blinded by the conventional; she can see through the foggy window. After all, you may remember that she was the one to sit at Jesus' feet to hear him teach, much like a man of her day would, choosing "the better part." She has already moved outside the "Overton window." Because of that status, probably anything she said to the disciples or the crowds would be seen as suspect. So what does she do?

She does something beyond language. A great act of devotion, bringing thousands of dollars of perfume to the dinner party. The good stuff. And she pours it all over Jesus' feet. And then she removes her hair from her covering, drapes it over his feet, and uses her locks as a silken cloth to caress every surface and crack with the expensive oil. Such a costly thing to do, not only financially, but also for her reputation. Women didn't do that to anyone but their husbands, if at all, and never in public. And certainly not to a rabbi! The feet, the hair. It is such an intimate act. And like the smell that filled the community of Bethany, everyone would have heard of this sensuous and shocking act. For those who were against Jesus, it would have confirmed their suspicions. For those who were with him, it likely made them angry, made them feel exposed.

But, as I have said before from this pulpit, Mary of Bethany is a kind of spiritual genius, who was able to look with Jesus upon the harsh truth that he was speaking about, and then act accordingly. She could tell that it would not be long before he would be murdered. But she wouldn't be heard. If they wouldn't listen to Jesus on this point, they certainly wouldn't listen to her! And so, if the disciples wouldn't, she would. She took the initiative and honored him.

The anointing of Jesus is not about being scandalous for scandal's sake, to be edgy. It is about saying thank you and honoring Jesus for what he is going through, connecting with him, in a time when even his closest friends won't understand. Will they ever get it? Can you imagine the isolation of this? And then imagine the refreshment of discovering someone who gets it. This scene is a moment of profound communion in a time of dread.

The disciples can't see the beauty of this act of devotion. Judas Iscariot is the first one to complain, to cry foul. I'm sure that he was upset that Mary of Bethany was stepping out of line, stepping outside of the Overton window of behavior for a woman, as a Jew, and as a loyal disciple of the movement.

But he doesn't attack her directly on those points. No, he's much more savvy. Like some seeking power in our day, he makes a fiscal argument to cover for his social and political aims. "What a mistake! What a waste! We could have used this to feed the poor instead! How will we account for this when people ask? How irresponsible. How imprudent. This is making us look bad."

Really, Judas? Is this your tactic? "We could have used the money for the poor?" Well, if you must! But if you think about it, there is no act of celebration that could withstand this argument. You could easily show up at any wedding, any birthday party, any funeral and play the scold saying: "That's a little much, isn't it? You should have gotten a simpler dress or a more austere casket, and given the savings to the poor." Yes, you could say that. But it is so much more complicated than that. "The poor are with us always," Jesus says. This is not to give up on the needs of the poor. They are an ever-present concern. "Always with us."

But he says this to recognize that some days are more special than others. Like the father who killed the fatted calf to put on a feast for his son who came back from being dead to him, some moments call for the elevation that comes with being generous. Some days are meant to be lavish. Take the Sabbath, a day of rest that goes to the heart of our tradition, or a birthday, or a wedding: Some days deserve the good china, and even in the midst of a world of great need, we are called by the highest call of love to give homage, to give thanks, tangible thanks, costly thanks.

"Leave her alone, Judas! Your head is in the sand. And your argument, especially as an embezzling treasurer, is cynical at best." (But Jesus doesn't mention this, actually. He keeps it civil.) "Mary of Bethany gets it! She was keeping that jar for a special day, and whoa-nelly is it a special time! I've told you that my hour is near, but she is

the only one to hear me, the only one to give me a going-away present. What a dear friend she is! Watch her! You may learn something!”

Despite the great likelihood that she would be shamefully misunderstood, Mary of Bethany proclaimed her deep insight. She broke the glass ceiling of that window by falling down to the floor in care and concern, to support Jesus in his final days with a moment of truth and goodness and beauty. Who knows? Perhaps this gave him the strength and support he needed to make it to the finish line of his life lived in and for God, no matter what. Who knows? Perhaps a single act of love can change the world. Or perhaps all the acts of love are connected, yours and mine, all the way back to Jesus and Mary of Bethany. For, act by act, we pour out our lives as a gift to others, filling heaven and earth with the common fragrance of hearts broken open in love for the world.

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