

Spontaneous, Extravagant Love

Yesterday, across this land, some 500,000 people gathered in 1,300 local spaces to peacefully protest unjust, oppressive policies and actions by our federal government. The “Hands Off!” protests were an example of practicing spontaneous extravagant love for self and neighbor. Multiple people here with us today participated in yesterday’s work. This is optional – please feel no pressure. But if you did participate and would like friends to have the opportunity to later ask you about your experience, I welcome you to raise your hand now if you participated in a protest yesterday. Thank you for setting an example of love in action.

In a spirit of gratitude, we freely gather today for worship – a sacred pause, a holy interruption of our daily rhythms to come together for the solidarity we find in community. We are on the live stream and in this house of worship – on land loved by First Nations and others before us, where we are building community now and into the future.

I invite you to join your hearts with mine in a word of prayer. God of the journey, open and soften our hearts and minds today as we recognize past experiences as well as potential new opportunities for practicing your love in the spontaneous, extravagant way of the woman who anointed Jesus with her tears and costly perfume. We ask this as followers of Jesus. Let the people say together, Amen: Amen!

Fellow sojourners, I invite you to wonder with me this morning: how have you recently acted with loving care toward yourself in a way that was spontaneous (perhaps it took by surprise) or extravagant (uninhibited)? How about toward another – what has it recently looked like for you to show loving care toward another in a way that was spontaneous or extravagant?

What might be the opposites of spontaneity and extravagance on spectra of ways of demonstrating loving care? I suppose that a faithful, habitual pattern of showing care would be the opposite of a spontaneous action. And perhaps a calculated action (and I mean that positively – one that thoughtfully, precisely responds to a known need) would be the opposite of an extravagant action.

And don't we need to experience all ways of caring in our lives?

- Perhaps a spontaneously caring person in your life can help you appreciate another person who is steady and dependable in their ways of showing care.
- Perhaps an uninhibited, extravagantly caring person in your life can help you appreciate another person who is thoughtfully precise in their ways of showing loving care.

I would like to share a story with you – an example of someone showing me spontaneous, extravagant loving care in such a way that it developed into a source (a key source in my life) of steady, dependable, precisely responsive care.

I was shy as a child – a quiet extrovert, taking it all in. Around the age of ten, my curiosity overpowered my quietude and I began to burst forth with endless questions. In my family of origin, we did not all find a sense of resonance and belonging in a same faith community. Our parents had decided together to send my siblings and me to a Kindergarten through eighth grade Lutheran school connected to the church where our father was raised and where some extended family still lived and participated. Our mother did not become a member of that church. She attended with us on a regular basis. And sometimes we would attend the Episcopal church in town, as that was the tradition of her childhood.

As I entered the Youth Confirmation program within our church at the age of twelve, learning sessions were woven into the daily school curriculum. As we dove into core ideas and practices of our church's tradition, I began to encounter firmly held beliefs that ran counter to the ways my parents and their friends seemed to experience and appreciate God and people.

I began to ask questions that ranged from "Why do the Episcopalians have artwork on their walls that honor Mother Mary and we don't?" to "How can it be that my mother's best friend will go to hell because she's a lesbian?" to (also a painful one) "Will my mom really not have salvation because she doesn't believe all of our church's teachings?" Children who find themselves confronting these sorts of toxic, inhumane teachings often experience spiritual trauma that can have lasting effects.

Fortunately, my wiring was such that I was internally beginning to identify the church's teachings as foolish and unworthy of my 13-year old faith at the same time that I was genuinely exploring the conflicts that piqued my spiritual and intellectual curiosity.

I am forever grateful to the seminary intern who was assigned to our church and school in 1995. He received every one of my questions, typed them up, did his biblical research, and returned to me pages on which I could see my question honored, a scripture verse that was to give me the definitive answer, and his brief explanation of how the scripture answered my question. That was, at first, an act of spontaneous, extravagant loving care. As it became a well-worn pattern across my eighth grade year, he demonstrated the steady and faithful, precisely responsive forms of caring for another person. Over time, trust built enough that it was to that individual that I wept, saying that I didn't feel I had any faith to confirm since I didn't seem to believe some of what the church was teaching.

And from a deeply faithful, caring space, that educator and pastoral intern said to me, *“Clare, I do think you still have faith. If the Holy Spirit wasn’t still at work in you, I don’t think you would still care enough to be asking questions.”* Talk about being seen! I was so assured of God’s presence with me that I decided to be confirmed into my Christian faith (all be it with deep ambivalence at the time) twenty-nine years ago come May 5th.

How was Vicar Steinberg able to show care to me as an spiritual curious 13-year old?

How were some of you able to show up at protests yesterday – likely nervous and possibly scared?

How was the socially ostracized woman able to step on forward and anoint her friend and teacher?

I think it takes great nimbleness of spirit, emotion, and thought. It takes being uninhibited by second guessing in those first opportunities to show spontaneous, extravagant care.

It requires being fully present in the moment.

Earlier in our service of worship, our opening words from a neighbor came from Rachel Marie Martin, motivational speaker and author. Martin has also written the following about friendship:

“And she sat with me. She didn’t need to give me answers. She was just there. Letting me be human. She listened. She cared. She knew that the greatest gift wasn’t found in trite words but rather the love a friend has for another that is shown by simply showing up. She wanted me to be happy. She taught me to be a better person. To show up more. To love more. To be there. Friendship isn’t always about the visible.”

But rather is more about those moments of simply being there for each other in the good. The bad. And the normal.”

Who in your life sits with you in that way? And possibly more importantly, with whom do you share a reciprocal pattern of sitting with one another in mutual care? It is so important that we make space and time to practice the reciprocity in our relationships.

The woman who approached Jesus to anoint his feet with perfume and tears and to tenderly dry them with her hair was inspired and compelled to show that loving care to Jesus. If we were only to give, we would run out. We must also receive. So when Jesus said this: *“Her many sins have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love.”* – he was explaining to us that her burdens were lightened by the continuous grace of God to such an extent that she could move in the give and take of love.

Rev. Dr. Marilyn Danielsen, in her piece “Giving Til It Feels Good,” writes about the spontaneity in the woman’s caring gesture toward Jesus. She notes how several characters in the story were “taken aback” (shocked, surprised in the moment). Instead of reacting per norms that culture has established, allow ourselves to be moved and touched by tenderness is what matters most. Have you ever heard yourself or another say, “I don’t know why I’m crying”? Perhaps it is because we let the love and beauty in. Maybe we DO now why we are crying.

Rev. Quinn Caldwell, in his piece “Make Haste to Anoint” writes about the impact of the extravagance in the woman’s caring gesture toward Jesus. He reminds us of how powerful her vulnerability was. It was her vulnerability and bravery with which she was extravagant.

He tells us there's *"no reason to be stingy with love when the world is so generous with pain."* And, *"When it might be your last touch, you don't want anything between you and them."*

As we move into coming time as a community and in our individual lives, there is much that needs our bravery and our vulnerability – both our spontaneous, extravagant care and our steady, faithful responsive care.

We will move into our strategic planning conversation today. And we will need to be listening carefully and lovingly to one another.

We will participate in Holy Communion. I invite you to approach with joy and vulnerability for this reminder of God's active presence with you.

May we practice love with spontaneity and extravagance and the steady, faithfulness and responsiveness that it requires, because Love is counting on us. Amen.

Rev. Clare Gromoll
St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)
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Luke 7:36-50, "Giving Til It Feels Good," "Make Haste to Anoint"