

Extravagance

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The Bible contains 4 complete accounts of Jesus life: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These four gospels vary widely in emphasis, and they tell the story of Jesus life in different ways.

Mark and John have no birth story, they jump right in with Jesus' public ministry as a man of 30.

Matthew and Luke on the other hand not only tell the familiar Christmas story, but also offer long genealogies telling us who Christ's earthly ancestors were.

Many miracles, appear in some books but not others.

Some of Jesus' most well known teachings are in only one, or two of the stories.

This shouldn't be surprising of course. We would expect different things from different biographies of other historical figures, which is why it is so great that we have 4 accounts, no one could tell the whole story, but together they give us a fuller picture of who Jesus was.

There are however a small number of stories which appear in all four gospels. These are apparently stories so important that you could not tell the story of Jesus without telling them.

To skip these stories would be like a biography of MLK without the March on Washington.

One is the story of the events leading up to Jesus' death, his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. It seems natural that such dramatic events would have been an essential part of the story.

The others, Jesus walking on water, Jesus feeding over 5000 people with a few loaves of bread and some fish. Makes sense, those were some of his most large-scale miracles.

And the only other story that appears in all four gospels, is the one we read today.

The story of a woman named Mary, pouring perfumed oil all over Jesus one night after dinner. This story, was so essential, that no one could not tell the story of Jesus without it.

And I know that the author here is pretty suspicious of Judas, and who could blame him writing in the wake of Judas' betrayal.

But I think regardless of his motivation, Judas asks a good question, one that I often have when I read this story, and I suspect some of you might have too.

Wasn't this a waste?

I mean this is Jesus. The man who had given his life to proclaiming liberty for the captive and justice for the oppressed.

He had spent his days telling the rich to sell everything and give the money to the poor.

He was practically an aesthetic, urging his followers to take nothing for their journey, to rely on the hospitality of others, to give even their shirt to who ever asked only for their coat.

I don't think Judas was out of line with his question. Shouldn't we have sold it? We could have given the money to the poor!

But Jesus does not rebuke her. On the contrary, he praises her. In fact, in Matthew's telling of the story Jesus closes by saying: "Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed, what she has done for me will be told."

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In a wonderful little book titled "The Way of Beauty" François Cheng begins by calling beauty, "evil's opposite."

We might more commonly think that good is the opposite of evil, not so Cheng says. The opposite of evil is beauty.

He makes his point in part by describing his own experiences of witnessing acts of evil unfold during war. As his life went along he found that the thing that felt at the other extreme of that evil was not seeing people doing good things. It was seeing beauty. In nature. In art. In poetry. In humanity.

Experiencing beauty was the opposite of encountering evil.

I think that's right. Although I have never been a firsthand witness to true evil, when I read accounts, or hear people tell their stories, or see videos and images of historical atrocities, or even the violence that seems to increasingly permeate our ordinary consciousness, the feeling I get in my stomach is the revulsion of its ugliness more than some kind of intellectual moral or ideological outrage.

I think that might get at why this story is so important to Christ's story.

In the coming weeks we will be recounting the stories of the last days of Jesus life. It is a story crammed with the worst evil the world can muster. Political and religious elites conspire to kill a dissident whose greatest crime is preaching love. Soldiers take sadistic delight in carrying out their orders to torture Jesus.

And in the end, he is killed, executed using one of the most ingeniously brutal torments humans have ever imagined, and left with his body on full display.

Could it be that today's story is the opposite of all that.

The opposite of senseless death, is this senselessly extravagant act of love.

The opposite of the callousness of the soldiers, is the tender intimacy of Mary wiping Christ's feet with her hair.

The opposite of evil's disregard, was her preparing his body the way one would prepare a body to be buried, while she still had the chance.

The opposite of the ugliness of the cross, is the beauty of this pouring, this act of unmistakable reverence.

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The people around Jesus reacted in a lot of different ways during his arrest, and trial, and crucifixion.

Some of them simply ran away because they couldn't bear it.

Some fought back, one even drawing a sword and attacking the crowd that came to arrest Jesus.

Others just drifted back into the crowd and pretended they never knew him.

It seems that the only person who got it right, was Mary, who broke open a vat of perfumed oil and poured it on Jesus. An extravagant, beautiful, act of love.

Sometimes in the face of evil, the only thing that will do is beauty.

Never underestimate the power of beauty, in the face of pain.

In the 1980s the right-wing government of El Salvador, with training and resources from the United States, was engaged in a full-scale civil war with a left-wing guerrilla force that was entrenched in the north of the country. The campaign was unimaginably brutal.

El Mozote was once a large village. But on December 11 of 1981 the entire population of the village was killed by the military. Almost a thousand people including hundreds of young children.

The tactic was called “draining the ocean.” The idea was that you could defeat the guerrilla by depriving them of supportive communities and the massacre was carried out by the Altacatl battalion of the Salvadoran Army which had just recently returned from completing counterinsurgency training at Ft. Bragg in North Carolina.

I have been to El Mozote. It is more or less abandoned now. There are a few crumbling walls, still filled with bullet holes.

The tower of the church didn't burn all the way down, and the bell is still hanging up there from the charred ruin.

Other than that thought, there is not much to see. The ground is dusty. It is hard to describe but the spirit of the place is just heavy with pain. Its viscerally unmistakable.

Except in the middle of it all though, there is this lush garden. Just barely within view where the road ends, a short walk past the church, to where the school once stood.

The footprint of the old school building is blooming. Thick green grass, vibrant flowers, and a colorful, almost playful mosaic along a wall, it looks like something you would see at a preschool, rainbows, a bright yellow sun, and silhouettes of children dancing and playing.

It is called “The Garden of the Innocents.” It memorializes the place where the army killed the children of El Mozote.

And it is viscerally, unmistakably, beautiful.

There was a moment the first time I stood there where the almost cartoonish colorfulness of it all felt inappropriate. I had the same question Judas had. Is this really ok?

But the longer I stood there, the more I realized just what this beauty declared.

It is a refusal to let the ugliness of evil define that place of those people. It is a defiant celebration of the joy and beauty of childhood. It is a reclaiming of memory. It is a glint of hope.

That beauty, carefully cultivated by loving hands, refuses to let that little patch of earth be defined by the worst thing that ever happened there. And it refuses to let the memories of the children of El Mozote be limited to the way in which they died.

But its just a garden, a little patch of flowers and grass, some mosaic tile and colorful paint. It didn't fix anything, it didn't solve one problem.

Yet somehow its beauty, just a tiny spot in an otherwise painful place, is enough to make you believe that human goodness will never be extinguished by even the greatest evil. Somehow it is enough to give you one firm hand hold...

Judas thought it was wasteful, the rest of them just thought it was kind of silly. After all there were big, weighty things afoot.

And this was just a bunch of perfume, and this extravagantly reverent woman, making a mess.

It didn't fix anything. It didn't solve one problem.

And yet, later, after the horror of the cross, people kept telling that story. And after Jesus' resurrection, people remembered that there had really only been one person wise enough to believe that beauty could entwine with such evil.

Only one person with enough vision to imagine a life beyond their fear and suffering.

Only one person who did something that held even a flickering of hope against the shadow of the cross.

And so whenever anyone told Christ's story. They told hers.

And we just might be sitting here today because a week before Jesus died, a woman poured expensive perfume over his head. And it was so beautiful, that wherever the Good News was proclaimed people remembered her.

And they remembered that beautiful thing that she did for him.

And it suddenly seemed like not even death could end of God's love.