

The God of the Extra Dessert

John 12:1-8

The Reverend Jane Willan

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My first church organized and ran a very well attended soup kitchen called "Open Table". More than 100 people—many homeless, all of them facing very hard times—would arrive at the church at 5:00 PM every Tuesday and quietly stand in line for whatever free food had been provided that night. Over time, the people of Open Table became family. Children, young people, the elderly. All gathered together in the basement of the congregational church. They were united by a few common elements. Poverty, loneliness, hunger, desire for a hot meal. Fellowship. The reason so many have ever gathered in church basements. Pulling out folding chairs, settling in. Six days before Passover, Jesus entered Bethany where Lazarus, so recently raised from the dead, was living. Lazarus and his sisters invited Jesus to dinner at their home. Martha served. Lazarus was one of those sitting at the table with them.

At Open Table, the food was cooked and served by a different group each night. These groups included other local churches, Kiwanis, Rotary, the Girl Scouts, 4-H Clubs, etc. Some groups arrived with great enthusiasm and served with a graciousness and energy that was inspiring. However, a few groups were quite open about their judgment of the low-income people who needed the meal. Occasionally servers could be overtly critical—even in the moment when they were called upon to be giving. I was always amazed at how resentful some of the servers could be towards the low-income people who received their "free" food. Unfortunately, church groups were among the most judgmental.

Mary came in with a jar of very expensive aromatic oils, anointed and massaged Jesus' feet, and then wiped them with her hair. The fragrance of the oils filled the house.

Every night at Open Table, when everyone had gathered and before the food was served, we would always have a "prayer and concerns" moment. One night, I remember, we had just ended a moment of silence followed by a very moving prayer for a man named Ron Adkisson. Ron, homeless for most of his life, had been a loyal member of Open Table. He had died that week. The room remained quiet as we sat for a moment thinking of Ron and all those whom we had lost over the years. In the stillness, a young girl requested prayer for a sick cousin and an older woman asked for volunteers to help her paint her kitchen. For a single hushed moment, we were a group connected by common tragedy, need, and collective support. There was a feeling of expectation and compassion in the air.

Then a woman who was serving food that night stepped up and said in a loud voice, "I just want to say that tonight *no one* is to take an extra dessert!" We all turned and looked at her as she stood like a member of the National Guard in front of the dessert table.

I recognized her as a member of another church. She had served at Open Table a few months earlier. I also noticed that the table she guarded was loaded with desserts--so numerous the plates of brownies, carrot cake, and chocolate chip cookies that leftovers would most likely end up tossed out or slipped into Ziplock bags and taken home. Her angry voice and resentful demand—that no one have the audacity to want extra—shattered the shared moment. The room sat silent with a sort of heavy, collective humiliation.

The perfume had filled the room there in Bethany. Every one sat with the knowledge of Jesus' impending death and the evidence of Mary's extravagant love.

Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples, even then getting ready to betray him, said, "Why wasn't this oil sold and the money given to the poor? It would have easily brought three hundred silver pieces." What's wrong with you? Who do you think you are to be so wasteful?

Jesus said, "Let her alone. She's anticipating and honoring the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you. You don't always have me." Leave her alone, he said.

I wish that night at Open Table, I had stood and said, "Hey leave these people alone." I wish I had turned to her the way Jesus turned to Judas and said, you can take you brownies and carrot cake and leave because these people know something you don't know. Because you and I must not read the same bible. You must not know the God of the prodigal son or the good Samaritan or the feeding of the 5000.

How could a good church lady not remember the stories she had must have been hearing since she was 5: the lost lamb, the woman at the well, the blind beggar, the ten lepers, the wedding at Cana. All stories of generosity and extravagant love. The God of the extra dessert is all thru the bible.

The generosity of my God knows no end. That my God is bounteous and magnificent and gracious and kind.

The God that I worship is the same God who called into being the soaring mountains, the rushing seas, the infinite galaxy, the constantly expanding universe. My God is the Alpha and the Omega. In other words, The God of the Extra Dessert.

And I believe that all of us at First Church are called to serve this God by graciously and gratefully accepting the extra dessert whenever it is offered and by offering the extra dessert whenever we can. By going through life in a constant state of giving—giving that is without pause or hesitation, judgment or grudge.

Until we can call ourselves The People of the Extra Dessert.

I have always wondered why the woman wanted to make sure no one took a second dessert? What was it that led her to such a tightfisted and miserable response to the poverty in that room? She protected vigilantly what she should have given away freely. She missed her opportunity to be generous.

Perhaps she didn't know that our God is a generous God and our love, a generous love. That we worship The God of the Extra Dessert.

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Rev. Jane apologizes, but she preaches from her notes, - so her sermons may not translate as well into a printed, document format. However, she loves to discuss her sermons, - so feel free to email her with any thoughts or questions!