

**Drag Queens, Mary, and Jesus: Lavish, Outrageous, and Extravagant Love**  
**A Sermon for St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church, St. Paul, MN**  
**by The Rev. Craig Lemming, *Associate Rector***  
**Sunday, April 7, 2019 – The Fifth Sunday in Lent**

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**In the name of the Triune God whose love for us is outrageous. Amen.**

As you made your way to Church this morning you may or may not have prepared yourself for a Sermon involving drag queens. In the anxious dream that I've been having about this Sermon, this is the moment when you all get up and run out of the Church screaming. So, I am relieved that my anxious dream did not come true; you have graciously remained in your pews; and affirmed that here at St. John's we have the courage to encounter the Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ in conversation with all sorts of geniuses. Thinkers ranging from Archbishops and Philosophers; to Feminist Biblical Scholars and yes, RuPaul Charles – America's most celebrated and successful drag queen who was named as one of *TIME* magazine's top 100 most influential people in the world.<sup>1</sup>

I have always been drawn to misfits. I love being with those resilient and creative folks whom society has shunned, disrespected, bullied, and ridiculed because of who they unapologetically happen to be. The shy, sensitive ones who are bullied and beaten up every day, and yet still turn up. The creative ones who are mocked every time they have the courage to reveal the good, the true, and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RuPaul>

the beautiful to those who are blinded by mediocrity. The nerds who geek-out about the nuances of the Fibonacci Series, Star Trek, or Sonata Form. The misfits and outcasts who suffer microaggressions and abuses every day because of who they love, or what they look like or what they wear; how they pray or speak, or when or where they happened to have been born. Those misfits who were never safe at house parties, but who were the life of the cast parties; who avoided their bullies by spending their lunch breaks designing costumes and sets or rehearsing for the opera, play, musical, or chapel service; those who snuck away from the compulsory sporting events to go to the cinema to see *The Talented Mr. Ripley* for the seventh time. They were on the chess team, sang in the choir, stayed in the library until it closed, and they had all the lines and stage directions memorized but were never cast in any of the roles.

Misfits and outcasts are my tribe, because in safe spaces, when our lives are not being threatened, policed, or appropriated, we can be who we are and freely lavish the uninhibited, unconditional love, joy, peace, kindness, and gentleness that the world continually denies us. We can extravagantly share all those gifts with each other in ridiculously fabulous, authentic, and outrageous displays of mutual affection.

Thinking about Mary of Bethany in this morning's Gospel, we remember that in her time, she too was a misfit. An outcast who was denied the full human dignity of her personhood because as a Jewish woman in first century Palestine she was only worth the sons she produced for her husband. Both unmarried and childless, Mary of Bethany, the misfit on the fringes of acceptability, performs one of the most beautiful, ridiculously extravagant, authentic, genuine, creative, and outrageous acts of love recorded in the canon of Holy Scripture.

In the *Women's Bible Commentary*,<sup>2</sup> biblical scholar Gail O'Day observes that Mary of Bethany's anointing of Jesus is an act of pure extravagance so lavish that the fragrance fills the entire house, and everyone present can also participate in it. The presence of Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead, creates a marvelous and poetic juxtaposition as Mary's marvelous aroma of nard replaces the odor of Lazarus's rotting corpse in the previous chapter of this Gospel. O'Day goes on to demonstrate how Judas's protest does not diminish Mary's act but actually reaffirms the extravagance of her gesture because we learn that her pound of pure nard was worth three hundred denarii – the financial equivalent of an entire year's wages.

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<sup>2</sup> Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, *Women's Bible Commentary*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 524-525.

O'Day outlines three ways Mary's anointing of Jesus anticipates the remainder of the Gospel of John. Firstly, Mary of Bethany's anointing anticipates Jesus' death and burial. After his death, Jesus will be anointed and buried in secret by men who are afraid to make their faith in Jesus public (John 19:38-39). Mary of Bethany, however, outrageously, unashamedly, and unapologetically anoints Jesus in front of everyone dining with him. Her declaration of faith in and love for Jesus is not deferred until after his death – no, Mary of Bethany, that outrageous misfit, lavishes her faithful witness to Jesus as the Anointed Christ while he is still living! Secondly, Mary of Bethany anoints Jesus' feet, rather than his head, thereby anticipating the foot-washing that Jesus himself will also outrageously administer to his disciples. Mary enacts through her foot-washing of Jesus the very same act of selfless service and discipleship that Jesus himself will model for his disciples on the night before he dies. Lastly, Mary of Bethany's anointing anticipates the love commandment that Jesus will give his disciples – **“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”**<sup>3</sup> Gail O'Day writes, “The depth of Mary's

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<sup>3</sup> John 13:34.

love for Jesus is signaled by the extravagance of her gift. Mary is the first person in the Gospel to live out Jesus' love commandment."<sup>4</sup>

Before we can fully appreciate the connection between Mary of Bethany and drag queens, let's pause here to consult with Rowan Williams. It seems a consultation with the work of a former Archbishop of Canterbury will lend my Sermon some much needed Anglican gravitas to balance out my upcoming praise of the holy wisdom of drag queens! Mary of Bethany is commemorated and venerated as a saint of The Episcopal Church.<sup>5</sup> In his book *Being Disciples*, Rowan Williams shows us how holy people or saints make us feel better than we are; they somehow enlarge our world, make us feel more like ourselves, open us up, and affirm us. He writes,

**I have a theory, which I started elaborating after I had met Archbishop Desmond Tutu a few times, that there are two kinds of egotists in this world. There are egotists that are so in love with themselves that they have no room for anybody else, and there are egotists that are so in love with themselves that they make it possible for everybody else to be in love with themselves. They are at home in their skins. It doesn't mean that they are arrogant or self-obsessed or think they are faultless. They have learned to sense some of the joy that God takes in them. And in that sense Desmond Tutu manifestly loves being Desmond Tutu; there's no doubt about that. But the effect of that is not to make me feel frozen or shrunk; it makes me feel that just possibly, by God's infinite grace, I could**

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<sup>4</sup> *Women's Bible Commentary*, 525.

<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary\\_of\\_Bethany#Commemoration\\_as\\_a\\_saint](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_of_Bethany#Commemoration_as_a_saint)

**one day love being Rowan Williams in the way that Desmond loves being Desmond Tutu.<sup>6</sup>**

In their co-created work, *The Book of Joy*, His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu share the Holy wisdom they have garnered during their long, faith-filled lives. Their co-writer Douglas Abrams writes,

**Their joy is clearly not easy or superficial but one burnished by the fire of adversity, oppression, and struggle... They offer us the reflection of real lives filled with pain and turmoil in the midst of which they have been able to discover a level of peace, of courage, of joy that we can aspire to in our own lives... Suffering is inevitable, they said, but how we respond to that suffering is our choice. Not even oppression or occupation can take away this freedom to choose our response.<sup>7</sup>**

Like Saint Mary of Bethany, like the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, drag queens are also misfits and outcasts well-acquainted with suffering, pain, rejection, ridicule, and being hated for who they are. Their response to that pain, suffering, rejection, and hatred is a lavish, outrageous, extravagant display of joy that is “burnished by the fire of adversity, oppression, and struggle.” They “make us feel better than we are; they somehow enlarge our world, make us feel more like ourselves, open us up, and affirm us.” Like Saint Mary of Bethany, they teach us how to outrageously, unashamedly, and unapologetically love ourselves and

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<sup>6</sup> Rowan Williams, *Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 52.

<sup>7</sup> His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu with Douglas Abrams, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World* (New York: Avery, an imprint of Penguin Random House, 2016), 3, 7.

each other so that we might know how to love our neighbor and God as extravagantly, lavishly, and outrageously as God loves all of us! This is the love that will sustain us as we journey into Passiontide next week and witness the extravagant outpouring of Jesus' love for all people in the midst of unspeakable and horrific suffering.

I leave you with two quotes. The first from my soul-mate, Russian Religious Philosopher, Nikolai Berdyaev, who writes:

**The greatest mystery of life is that satisfaction is felt not by those who take and make demands but by those who give and make sacrifices. In them alone the energy of life does not fail, and this is precisely what is meant by creativeness. Therefore the positive energy of life is to be found in love, in sacrificial, giving, creative love.<sup>8</sup>**

Or, in the words of RuPaul Charles:

**We're all born naked  
The rest is drag.<sup>9</sup>**

Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, (San Rafael, CA: Semantron Press, 2009), 141.

<sup>9</sup> <https://youtu.be/S7kvNP7qI5Q>