This is the day the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it. The texts for our message are the lessons for this day.

Everything about it was all wrong. Inappropriate! Vulgar! Scandalous! Embarrassing! Humiliating! Wasteful! Something only one of “those kind of women” would do. And she did it in public, for crying out loud! Good thing she had no husband; no surprise, either, after doing what she did! No self-respecting man would want a woman like that for his wife. And if he had one like that, you can bet your last shekel, her shoes would be set outside the door and she’d be divorced faster than you could say “prostitute” because that’s what a woman who does things like that is, a “prostitute.”

And while we’re on the subject, what kind of man would let a woman like that do something like that to Him, and in front of other men, no less?

Sounds a little “X” rated for church doesn’t it? And certainly not the way Jesus described this scene in the other two Gospels (Matthew & Mark) that tell the same story, where He described it as a “beautiful thing.”

What was this despicable deed? Well, it’s everything: It’s a woman who ought to be serving at the dinner table like her sister Martha (the “good” sister), not kneeling behind it at a man’s bare feet. And not just kneeling there, but touching his feet, although Matthew and Mark say it was Jesus’ head she anointed - maybe they were just being discreet or she anointed Him on more than one occasion.

And don’t think for a moment it was only Judas who had a problem with this not-so-beautiful thing. None of the three Gospels say much about them, but I’ll bet you another shekel that 11 jaws dropped to the floor as the disciples first looked on in shocked silence and then turned to Lazarus, wondering what kind of man would let his sister degrade herself in such a manner. And if Martha saw even a bit of it, you can be certain that she stormed off into the kitchen, rattled some pots and muttered something about her trashy little sister.

Oh, I forgot the hair thing. Among the Jews, a woman’s hair was her crowning glory, literally and figuratively; something that no man but her husband ever saw, and here she is, wiping and weeping, and weeping and wiping. And let’s not forget the final insult: Judas was right: a pound of that perfume cost a whole year’s wages; people saved for an entire lifetime just to get enough for a decent burial. That’s when people were anointed - when they were dead, so they didn’t stink while they rotted in the grave. It’s a little like trying on a casket ahead of time — creepy!

And that, brothers and sisters, is how it looked back then. Not as it does to us in the here and now; where women don’t hide their hair; where people touch each other a lot. Once this
winter without end lets up the people of the tundra will once again be walking around the lakes of Minnesota with all kinds of PDA going on (public displays of affection) in front of God and everyone. We’re so used to seeing such behaviors; they hardly seem intimate, let alone scandalous.

But there you have it: six days before the Passover during which Jesus would die, only days after raising Lazarus from the dead, with the plot to kill Him already hatched and the betrayer counting not only the 300 denarii he could have sold and stolen the perfume for, not to mention the promise of another 30 silver shekels for doing his dark and dirty deed with a kiss in the Garden of Gethsemane and the only who’s taking it calmly is the guy about to die.

What are we to make of that? Why do Matthew, Mark and John think we need to know of Mary’s extravagant act, because after all, they were writing all this down for everyone who came after them, including us? Why tell us?

Well, let’s start with gratitude, overwhelming gratitude for a man who summoned your brother out of the grave, after 4 stinky, smelly days of decomposing? How could anyone remain unmoved by that? By the way, let’s give Martha her due, here. I’ll bet she put out a pretty fine spread, without the help of her flaky sister.

And if Martha’s gratitude strikes us rather reserved Lutherans as a little more respectable, well, there are times when someone does something so far over the top for you, your soul rips off every restraint and you do, well, whatever it takes to show your gratitude even if it costs you everything you’ve got.

Five Sundays into Lent and maybe you’re getting a little tired of all the “cross-talk,” about betrayal and death, heavily seasoned with sin and guilt. And though it might seem otherwise, it’s not about guilt. It’s about grace. It’s about gratitude, because some day Jesus is going to call your brother or your sister, or your dad or your mom out of the grave. And He’s going to call you, too. Now that’s worth celebrating!

And not just celebrating, how about sacrificing? I’m not talking about “giving up something for Lent”—some folks follow that custom, some don’t. I’m talking about seeing the life you’ve been given, as one huge opportunity to spend yourselves in serving the One who gave Himself for you, by serving the ones whom He loves. I think it was Mother Theresa who often spoke about her work among the poor as ministering to Jesus in His most “distressing disguise.” Jesus said it, too, about whatever we do for the least and lowest of His brothers and sisters, we are really doing it to Him and for Him. And frankly, that scares me. It should scare you, too. It scares me because I don’t think I’m big enough or generous enough or gracious enough to give all of me and mine away. If you want to try, get out your checkbook and right now write a check for 300 days’ worth of your current salary. And then get out your credit cards. And then sign over your house and your car and call “Goodwill” to come and pick up the rest. But I confess I’m not ready to lead by example here.

Did you get the little hint John wrote into His gospel about Mary’s gracious gift? He said “the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.” Now granted that type of perfume was
pretty strong—it had to be to cover up the stench of death. And granted also, some perfumes these days are pretty potent and they leave a cloud long after the wearer has gone. But do you know how much of that perfume it would have taken to fill the house?

All of it, the whole pound, every last slippery sliver slathered on the Savior’s soles! (I couldn’t resist the alliteration, and yes, I did practice saying that a lot). Her gratitude was “Good to the Last Drop.” But the point isn’t how grateful, gracious or generous Mary was, though you have to admire that kind of devotion.

The point is just a little later when its purpose was revealed. “Leave her alone,” Jesus said, “she bought it for the day of my burial.” You see, kings were anointed on the head in the hopes they would use those heads to rule their people wisely and well. Corpses were anointed on the feet, because the dead don’t get their feet dirty; they don’t need their feet anymore because they won’t be stepping out.

And whether Mary knew deep in her heart that her Lord was soon to die or whether she, along with the others, had heard Him speak of it on the way to Jerusalem and unlike the dim disciples, she actually believed it, you’ll have to ask her someday. But Jesus made it clear, His life was soon to be poured out, as a sacrifice, just as Paul wrote to the Philippians one chapter earlier than the reading today, when he said that we Christians strive to be like Jesus, who though He was in the form of God, did not grab for all its glory, “but emptied Himself…and become obedient unto the cross.”

That’s the Savior we’re following, that’s the One we’re imitating, not just in this Lent but in this lifetime, the One whose blood was “Good to the Last Drop,” good for all us sinners, who like Mary, find ourselves speechless and on our knees, overwhelmed by the One who gave His all for us. Amen.

Now may the God whose grace waters the deserts of our lives open our hearts by His love and transform us into vessels of His extravagant grace.