

“Extravagance”  
The Reverend Michael L. Delk  
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia  
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Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

Spring of my senior year in high school began like every other: with conditioning for Track & Field season. The word “conditioning” comes from an ancient Sanskrit root that means “pain and suffering inflicted by an authority figure on a reluctant yet consenting person.” The lexicon also includes this side note: “see upchuck.”

OK, I might have taken some etymological liberties, but for a sprinter like me, who believed that 400 meters was a very long race, conditioning was unpleasant. After conditioning, we started working on our events, which for me, included 4 x 100 relay. I was lead leg, which meant plenty of practice coming off the blocks.

We usually started practicing at half-speed and then worked our way up to full-speed, usually three or four days before our first meet. I had been experimenting with a new gait, a key technical aspect to sprinting. Now it was time to test it going all out.

I came out of the blocks cleanly and the gait was going well the first 20 meters, until I started around the bend and transitioned into the long-stride portion. At that point, I went down hard. I was hurt. The rapid swelling and discoloration confirmed my worst fears. I’d torn a hamstring, badly. That usually meant season over, but it was early yet; still time to heal.

So I watched on the sidelines, as the meets came and went, until the time came to see if the rest and therapy had worked. To qualify for the regional meet, an athlete had to compete in an event at four meets. We wrapped my leg up tight, and I gobbled up ibuprofen tablets like M&M’s.

The first meet went pretty well. I didn't win anything, but I survived. The second meet was much tougher. By the third meet, I was dizzy with pain every time I came out of the blocks.

That third meet was against our cross-town rivals, the Russellville Panthers. I finished my first race at speed. My second race, I literally limped across the finish line. I had two more events to run. While I was waiting, I went to scotch the blocks for a teammate getting ready to run the 300 meter hurdles.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Russellville's coach making a beeline for us across the football field. He stopped right over me, and said, "Look, you've done enough for today. Your coach says you need one more meet to make regional. How about me and Tyrone come over to your track one day, and you guys can take a nice 100 meter walk, and we'll call it a meet." I could hardly believe my ears. These were our archrivals. It was a kind, gracious offer, almost extravagant.

I imagine that each of us could tell of a story like this, an episode in which someone offered us an extravagant gift that took our breath away and left us speechless. Of course, the one story we all share is the most extravagant gift anyone can give. When Jesus sacrificed his life on a cross for our sake, he set the unbeatable standard for extravagant giving.

When faced with such a gift, one of the toughest things is to know how to respond. I thanked Russellville's coach, and told him I'd get back to him after our next meet, where I did run. However, when it comes to the extravagant gift of everlasting life Jesus gave us by sacrificing his own life, we cannot say, "Let's see," or "Maybe," and we

certainly cannot afford to decline. We need that extravagant gift. There is no reason to refuse it, and every reason to accept it.

But when we accept an extravagant gift, we generally want to respond with gratitude somehow. We see this in Paul's letter to the Philippians. Paul's response to Jesus' extravagant gift was to give his own life in the service of spreading the Gospel. "For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish . . ." And Paul had a lot to lose.

He was a person reckoned as righteous by his Jewish peers, a meticulous observer of the Law, from a prominent tribe, well respected. This is what he describes as rubbish. To most people, the things Paul gave up represented their hearts' desire, an aspiration to be dreamed of, yet never achieved. But when Paul encountered the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus, everything changed.

What Paul used to pride himself on now seemed worthless to him. He recognized the extravagant gift Jesus had offered, and Paul gave everything else up – his reputation, his safety, his comfort – and traded it all in for a life of travel, uncertainty, frustration, imprisonment, and abuse. We tend to think of Paul as crazy, for the apparent delight he took from his suffering, but he remains perhaps the sanest person who ever lived. He received the extravagant gift of Jesus and responded accordingly.

We see a similar story in the Gospel of John, when Mary took a pound of pure nard, very rare stuff, the product of a plant indigenous to the mountains of northern India. Its value was equivalent to nearly a year's wage for a common laborer. She poured it all over Jesus' feet.

This made Judas upset. Here was an act of extravagance. Sold at market, the nard could have fetched enough money to feed many poor people, or to line Judas' pocket. But taking his complaint at face value, Judas had a point. What he failed to appreciate was that Mary's extravagant anointing of Jesus was a merciful gesture to a man doomed to die horribly. Jesus mentions that Mary was anointing him in advance for his burial, but her extravagance was also her loving response to the love Jesus had brought into her life. And that's the thing about love. It is inherently irrational, illogical, and occasionally it can even seem irresponsible. But that's love.

These acts of love began long before Jesus came to dwell among us. Psalm 126 celebrates the release of the Israelites from their captivity and their return to the Promised Land of their ancestors. "Those who sowed with tears will reap with songs of joy." They had been redeemed, restored. After all hope was lost, the incredible happened. It was an extravagant gift from a God who had been abandoned and betrayed by His chosen people. But they had repented and renewed themselves during the time of exile, and God forgave, glad to be reconciled with the nation he loved. And they responded to God's extravagance with songs of joy and much more.

How do we respond to the extravagant gift of Jesus? Well, for starters, we worship: a word that simply means "ascribe worth to." Worship is meant to be an extravagant expression of our gratitude and love for the God who gave us our lives, and when we lost our lives in sin, gave our lives back to us through the salvation wrought by Jesus Christ. Worship is not so much about how it makes us feel, though I hope worship lifts your spirit, rather worship is about praising God in response to the gift already given,

not hoping for any further reward, because the greatest gift we could receive has already been offered on a cross.

Another way to respond to God's extravagance is through prayer, which strengthens our relationship with God and reminds us and others that we depend upon God for all that are and all that we have. And then, of course, there is the service of ministry, which comes in so many varieties, all of which are important and give glory to God.

None of this may feel extravagant to us. We may harbor dreams of travelling afar to a barren and dangerous place where we can really make a difference in the world, or we may want to stay here and make a big impact through some grandiose effort. However, the extravagant response is actually tougher than these lofty aspirations, worthy as they are.

Extravagance, for most Christians, is not measured by a weight of costly perfume or the quest for ministry in the middle of the worst misery we can find. Instead, the daily practice of faith constitutes a sort of extravagance, because it is the gift that keeps on giving. The cumulative effect of that giving over time really does comprise an extravagance, because like Paul it means giving our lives to God to use as God chooses.

If you have ever been blessed with a spouse, or children, or parents, or friends – which I think pretty much covers all of us – then you know that it can be excruciatingly hard to maintain that fidelity of love and humble service to another person. Such diligence can tire us and make us ache, like a guy trying to run fast on a busted hamstring. But it is this careful attention to the little things in life; it is the constant giving of oneself to God and others that shows the measure of our love and the

extravagance of our response to God's scandalous, obscene, over-the-top gift to us. Too often we equate spectacular with extravagant. Those two things don't always go together.

I didn't do too well at the regional meet, in case you were wondering. I didn't win a race all year long for the first time in four seasons. But I ran. I ran because I loved it, even though it hurt, and wow, did it hurt! But it was worth it, if for no other reason than the fact that running was a way of honoring and responding to that extravagant gift offered by the coach of our archrival.

That's life. When we're tired and hurting, when we have a weak spot that threatens to stop us, we line up in the blocks and push off hard when the starter's gun fires, simply because there's nothing else to do if we want to respond extravagantly to the gift God has given us: grace, truth, love, and life. Indispensable prizes more precious than any victory, any medal, or any accomplishment we can imagine. And our response, more often than not, happens in the same way a sprinter makes his way down the track: one step at a time. Amen.