Ridiculous Devotion

November 14 & 15, 2026 | John 12:1-8

Generosity can seem ridiculous.

I think radio station fundraisers are ridiculous.
They interrupt programming that you love and put overly perky people on the microphones pumping you to give. One station I listen to does this multiple times a year. I love the station and get music there I can't get on any other radio station, but they have one program that really rubs me the wrong way. So, I won't give them a dime. That's what I tell myself. But another station that I listen to regularly has no objectionable programming, and I still don't give. It all seems…ridiculous.

Many Americans thought the space program was ridiculous, too.
Today, when we look at images of astronauts walking on the moon, it makes us proud, and it feels like it had to happen. But at the time, many Americans asked how we could spend billions of dollars on the space program when there were hungry people and people who couldn't get an education here on Earth. Roughly 50% of people thought it was too much.[1] Ridiculous? Maybe.

Generosity is tough when we have so many bills, obligations, and competing priorities.
That's the world most of us live in. There are lots of things crying out for our money. We're trying to pay off college, buy a house, raise kids, save for retirement, go on vacation, pay for a new roof, or manage our retirement savings. That's just our money! Our time is stretched just as thin. Making generosity fit into that puzzle isn't easy.

But Mary's brother had died and been raised back to life!
Mary of Bethany was the sister of Jesus' friend, Lazarus. Lazarus became ill and Mary and her sister sent word to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." The request in their message was undeniable – please come and heal him. Jesus tarried, Lazarus died, then Jesus came to Bethany with His disciples. When she saw Jesus, Mary fell at his feet, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Then the unimaginable happened. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead! What ridiculous generosity on Jesus' part! What could Mary do to respond to that kind of generosity? How would you respond?

Do you think generosity is ridiculous?
Every time I mention generosity, some of you turn me off as I do my favorite radio stations during their pledge drives. And I'm sure that some of you are juggling bills and feel like there is nothing you can give. Generosity seems ridiculous. But for Mary, generosity was more than an option—it was a necessity. No matter how ridiculous it seemed.

Mary showed ridiculous devotion to Jesus.

There was tension in the air when Jesus returned to Bethany.
Yes, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. Many believed in Him because of it, but it also cemented the resolve of the Jewish religious leaders to destroy Him. Passover was about to begin in Jerusalem,

[1] https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/09/moondoggle-the-forgotten-opposition-to-the-apollo-program/262254

and Bethany was just an hour's walk outside the city. People gathered for a meal. **John 12:1-2** sets the scene,

> Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table.

Martha, as usual, was serving people.

Mary poured an extravagant amount of pure nard on Jesus' feet.

What's extraordinary here is the perfume itself—pure nard made from the roots of an herb. It's the amount—nearly twelve ounces. And it's the way Mary applied it in **John 12:3**,

> Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

Jesus was reclining with the other guests—likely on something like a sofa—with his feet away from the table. Mary approached him and started pouring the perfume on his feet. She was anointing Him. Then she wiped His feet with her hair. What love! What devotion!

Judas thought Mary's actions were ridiculous.

In John 12:5 he objected out loud,

> Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?

John is quick to remind us that Judas betrayed Jesus, his motive wasn't really to take care of the poor. He was the disciples' treasurer, and he regularly stole money for himself. But look at the essence of the charge anyway. Judas pointed out just how extravagant the gesture was. If the perfume were sold, it would fetch 300 denarii. That's a whole year's wages. That's a lot of money. Judas thought there were better uses for that money. Judas probably wasn't alone either. Ridiculous.

Has anyone ever called your generosity ridiculous?

Many of you are generous with your money, as well as with your time and talents. You're spending time by simply being here today for worship. There are people who will tell you that you're crazy. You may have a non-Christian father, and he may hear that you give and serve here at Valley, and he may tell you that you're being foolish. You may have a non-Christian wife who says "not with our money" every time you say you want to give. You may at times feel like Mary, kneeling on the floor at Jesus' feet with nard dripping from your hair, thinking that you are doing something beautiful, but you look up and see Judas accusing you of being ridiculous.

Jesus set the record straight.

In **John 12:7** Jesus said, …

> Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial.

Jesus says that what she is doing here is right. She was showing devotion to Jesus, and it wasn't ridiculous at all. Jesus, who raised her brother from the dead, is worthy of such devotion. Jesus, who is the Son of God, is worthy of such devotion. In a sense, Mary was already preparing Jesus, the Lamb of God, for His burial after His coming death. Instead of being "ridiculous," overflowing generosity is "just right."

We have a generous God.

God gave us life.

In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, author C.S. Lewis put the Gospel story into a fantasy realm. *The Magician's Nephew*, the story set first in time, includes the creation of Narnia. Aslan, the great lion who roughly represents Jesus in the Chronicles, brought a new world into being. Lewis shows us Aslan singing the world into being. Aslan's song coated the hills with grass and summoned trees from the ground. His song caused animals to spring to life from the ground itself. Finally, "…the deepest, wildest voice they had ever heard was saying, 'Narnia, Narnia, Narnia, awake.'" God has spoken that word over Earth—not just Narnia—and over you, "AWAKE!"

Jesus gave His life for us.

Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem for Passover. There, Judas would betray Him. The religious leaders would arrest Him. His disciples would abandon Him. The Romans would condemn Him. And Jesus would die on a cross with the weight of the sin of the world on His shoulders and the wrath of God crashing down on His head. Death wouldn't be the end for Him, though. Three days later, He rose from the dead victorious over sin, death, and evil. Now, we can be forgiven. We can be rescued from Hell and adopted into God's family. We become sons and daughters of God. We are given new life, and death isn't the end for us!

God gives us eternal life.

Death remains a problem for now. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, but Lazarus eventually died again. We all die. But the Bible promises us eternal life. When Jesus returns, we will be resurrected. One day, Heaven and Earth will pass away, and God, who spoke the world into being in the first place, will speak New Heaven and New Earth into being. The Bible describes that as a place where life overflows forever. You should read the end of the Bible—Revelation chapters 21 and 22. Those chapters always blow my mind! There is one detail there that always captures my attention. In New Jerusalem, there will be a river that flows from the throne of God. Then in **Revelation 22:2** we read,

> … on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

That's the Tree of Life from the book of Genesis. No longer will there be just one tree. In eternity, there will be an orchard of them. That's where we will live. Forever. That's our generous God.

God's generosity can get hidden in the fog of life.

As I say that God is incredibly generous, you may be saying to yourself, "Not to me!" You may have lost your husband and frankly be angry with God. You may have a broken relationship with your children and you're hurting. You may have lost your business despite praying fervently that God would save it. So, when I say that God is generous, you may be thinking, "I just don't see it." That's where our pain in life can be very much like a fog. I don't mean to imply that the pain is not real; fog is real. Nor do I mean to say that your pain is going to burn off quickly. But in the fog, there are things we can't see. Big things like mountains. Rivers. Trees. We can't see them through the fog. And the same is true of God's goodness and generosity. Just because we can't see them through the pain we face doesn't mean that they aren't there, that God isn't there.

I had a difficult time singing, "The Goodness of God" for years.
In January of 2019, God made it clear to me and then to Tammi that He was calling us to leave our home in Minnesota, a place we had come to love deeply. That was a difficult calling to hear from God. During that season, "The Goodness of God" was popular. Our church sang it frequently. It was tough for me to sing. Not because I didn't believe it. But because I did. I sang, "Your goodness is running after, it's running after me …" even though I was hurting. Because I knew that even in the fog, even when I couldn't see it, God is incredibly good. Incredibly generous. And the pain of leaving the church we planted, friends we had made, and even our children has turned into the joy of life here and now with you. And that's just the beginning of His goodness every step of the way.

We have a generous God, so we are generous givers.

When it comes to generosity, we may ask, "What is enough?"
I belong to a professional organization. I have dues to pay each year. Each year I get a bill. With the bill comes a note that we are welcome to give more to support the organization's work. But I always look to see what the bill is. What's enough? We can approach giving and everything else about our relationship with God that way. But Mary's ridiculous devotion to Jesus could crack open the door to considering something else.

If you have never given before, give something.
Cracking the door open to considering something else may be the most difficult step to take. To give something financially if you've never given a dollar. To serve in some way if you've never given of your talents. That first step is difficult, but it's so important. If you have never given a dollar here at Valley before, I would love to be able to give you $5 just so you can put it in the plate with your name on it, just to get started.

I grew up with the practice of tithing.
That's the practice of giving ten percent of your income back to God. In the church I grew up in, that's what we were taught to do. It's what we were expected to do. It may sound like a legalistic obligation, but it wasn't. It was a joy. I remember getting paid for the first time for mowing lawns. I was ready that weekend when the offering plate came by, I put my offering in, and I felt like I had dropped a million dollars into the collection plate. I took great joy in worshipping God by my gifts. I was thrilled to think that I was helping to fund ministry. I couldn't wait to get paid again and to give again. Tithing a percentage of our income to God is a fantastic practice. It's taught in the Old Testament, but the New Testament never treats it as an obligation. Or as a destination.

What if we gave to God the way Shah Jahan gave to honor his wife?
Shah Jahan became ruler of the mighty Mughal Empire and "King of the World" in India in the early 1600s. He referred to his wife and queen as "Chosen One of the Palace." Court poets wrote that she was so beautiful that the moon hid its face in shame. She died giving birth to their fourteenth child, and Shah Jahan set out to build a monument fit for his queen. It was designed by the finest minds available, made of white marble, inlaid with jewels, and marked by calligraphy. It took more than 20,000 workers more than 15 years to complete. But her memorial, her mausoleum and eventually the Shah's as well, is the Taj Mahal.[2] What if we gave like that? Not in amount. But in the spirit of ridiculous devotion and overflowing generosity.

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[2] https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/world-heritage/article/taj-mahal

Let's give as though the Kingdom of God were our pearl of great price.
The New Testament calls us to generosity that reflects God's own generosity and overflows out of love for Him. Jesus says that God's work in the world, in our lives, and in the future—the Kingdom of God—is like a pearl of great price. When we see it, we sell everything we own to have it. We're no longer worried about what is enough. We have been given something of immeasurable value. So, we—like Mary—are eager to be generous. Because we are grateful.

We have a generous God, so we are generous people.

Mary shows us something important about being disciples of Jesus.
Mary seemed to understand Jesus—what He was saying and who He is. She also seemed to understand how to respond to Jesus. When she had the chance, she sat at His feet, listening to every word He said. When she needed Him, she reached out. When He blessed her, she responded with profound gratitude and ridiculous generosity. That's what disciples do!

We are generous with our whole lives.
We've talked about generosity with our treasure, and that is important. But it's part of being generous with our whole selves. You may have heard the phrase "time, talents, and treasure" That encompasses a much broader sense of being generous. Scott Ridout, the former President of Converge Worldwide, is a great leader and a clear thinker about generosity. He adds "touch." We are called to be generous with our touch as well. That doesn't mean that we put our hands on every person we meet. Rather, it means that we are generous with our attention, encouragement, focus, and connection. What a gift that is! Time, talent, treasure, and touch begin to help us see what it means to be generous with our whole lives.

Mother octopuses take whole-life generosity seriously.
Toward the end of their lives, mother octopuses lay eggs in chains in a den. The mother octopus stays with her eggs—keeping them aerated, clean, and safe. She won't leave. Marine biologists in California found one deep-water mother octopus watching over her brood. They watched her over months. She stood watch for more than four years. Then the eggs hatched. Her vigil was over. She had given her whole self to protecting those eggs.[3] What generosity!

Generosity might seem ridiculous.
Your life might be too full of too much already—too many bills, too many demands, too many obligations. There is no room for generosity. It sounds ridiculous! Everyone tells you that it's ridiculous!

But it's not ridiculous at all.
We have been given everything. And God, the giver of all good things, is just getting started. May His generosity overflow in ours.

[3] https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/deep-sea-octopus-egg-tending-duties-last-over-four-years-180952213