

Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family

Title: Unreasonable Decision

Lesson: John 12:1-8

Friends, have you ever had to choose between the value of life and money? Have you ever chosen value, even when it was obviously a loss or a decision that didn't make sense to others? Have you ever made a decision to give up something profitable—something that could bring you gain—in order to pursue what you believed had greater value?

Sometimes, such decisions are hard for others to understand. But you made them because you saw something others didn't—you recognized the value behind that choice. So even though others might view your decision as unreasonable, you carried through with it and never regretted it. Have you ever made such an “unreasonable” choice?

If my questions feel difficult to answer, let me help you approach them a little more simply, with an everyday example. Do you like flowers? Do you ever buy them?

Many people like flowers, but from a certain perspective, buying flowers can look like an unreasonable thing to do. Why? Because once you buy them, all that's left is for them to wilt. After three days or maybe a week, they're already starting to wither. So some people might ask, “Why buy flowers when they're just going to die?” They might say it's unreasonable or a waste of money.

But for those who love flowers, the happiness flowers bring is more valuable than the money they cost. So they don't see buying flowers as wasteful—they see it as meaningful.

Speaking of flowers, it reminds me of a story about my parents. When my mother graduated from college, she and my father were dating but not yet married. She was very excited to receive a graduation gift from him. He gave her something wrapped like a gift—but do you know what it was? Was it flowers? Or a ring, or a pair of earrings?

No, it wasn't anything like that. What she received from him was a stapler.

She was quite disappointed because she had been hoping for flowers. When she asked him why he gave her a stapler, he said, “I thought it would be practical. You'll need to make a lot of resumes to find a job, so I figured a stapler would be useful.”

That sounds very reasonable, doesn't it?

But my mother didn't like that kind of reasonableness. She preferred something unreasonable. In this context, I think we can translate "unreasonable" as "romantic."

One cultural difference I've noticed between couples in Korea and the U.S. is how they handle the bill at a restaurant. In the U.S., it seems common for couples to "split the bill" after a meal, each paying for what they ate. But in Korea, it's more typical for the man to pay for the woman's share as well. Maybe it's a way Korean men, who are often more reserved, express love. Regardless of how much or little money they have, it's often seen as an attitude or manner a man should uphold.

Another example is that in Korea, after a date, it's considered polite for the man to safely escort his partner to her home. My home and Esther's home were about an hour and a half apart by subway. Reasonably speaking, it would've made sense for us to meet halfway, spend time together, and then each go back to our own homes—it'd be practical and convenient. But I often chose to take her all the way to her home, because that meant I could spend a little more time with her. That joy was greater for me. So I would drop her off at her door and then take the subway back home for another hour and a half.

Have you ever made an unreasonable decision in your life for the sake of something valuable?

Times may have changed a lot, but in many homes, the role of a mother still feels incredibly important and significant. Mothers weren't always mothers from the start—they too had dreams they wanted to achieve when they were young and desires to pursue their careers. Yet, to feed and raise their children, out of love for them, many have put their dreams and careers on hold or even sacrificed them entirely. I can't help but think that perhaps all of us are here today because of that unreasonable love from our mothers.

In the Bible story we read today, there's a woman named Mary. Back then, Mary was a very common name, so there are several Marys in the Bible. The Mary here is the one who had siblings named Martha and Lazarus. They faced a major difficulty: her brother Lazarus was terribly sick. She and her sister Martha called doctors and tried feeding him all sorts of medicines said to be good for him, but Lazarus only grew weaker, with no signs of improvement. They had a good relationship with Jesus, so as a last resort, they asked Him to heal their brother.

But Jesus didn't come to them right away, and in the meantime, their brother suffered and passed away. His body grew cold and was moved to a tomb. It even started to smell. Then Jesus arrived. By that point, Lazarus had been dead for four days, so

Mary and Martha had no expectations—they were immersed in grief. But Jesus comforted them and began calling Lazarus out of the tomb. When Jesus called him, Lazarus’s heart started beating again, his body warmed up, and he came back to life. Jesus turned everyone’s sorrow into joy.

Most people focused on the fact that Lazarus was brought back to life and rejoiced over it. But Mary, who had always loved listening to Jesus’s teachings, came to a full realization through this event that Jesus was the Son of God. She understood and accepted that the most important thing in her life was to follow Jesus Christ. So she made a big decision: she decided to offer Jesus a pound of very expensive pure nard perfume, which she had bought with money she’d saved up nearly her whole life. This perfume was incredibly costly, but she didn’t hesitate—she put her decision into action. Depending on the Gospel, some say she poured it on Jesus’s head, others say on His feet. These differences vary based on each Gospel’s focus and audience, but what’s more important than whether it was His feet or His head is that Mary offered Jesus this precious perfume, which was practically her entire fortune.

Of course, not everyone understood Mary’s decision and actions. Some even saw her behavior as unreasonable and viewed it critically. For example, Judas Iscariot couldn’t grasp the value Mary was pursuing and following—he only saw the monetary worth of the perfume and thought it was a waste. Though Mary’s actions might have seemed unreasonable to most people, to her, it was a decision more precious and valuable than anything in the world because, for her, Jesus Christ was everything in her life. And Jesus Himself regarded her decision and actions as precious, seeing her faith and her heart through them. Her unreasonable faith and her unreasonable decision completely transformed her life and drew her closer to Jesus.

One of the things I’m really proud of about the United Methodist Church is that its mission direction follows the “Missio Dei,” meaning “the mission of God.” There’s something similar but different called “the mission of the church.” When we partake in communion, we don’t distinguish based on membership, baptism, gender, race, culture, or language—we see and accept each other as one family, one body in Christ. Likewise, a mission that follows the Mission of God is about spreading God’s love and sharing Christ. But on the flip side, the mission of the church sometimes prioritizes expanding its influence over Christ Himself.

The direction of the United Methodist Church, following the Mission of God, is reflected not just in its mission but in every aspect, including its system. That’s why in the United Methodist Church, a Black pastor might be appointed to a Korean congregation, or a Korean pastor to a White congregation, and gender isn’t a barrier—

everyone is treated equally. This cross-racial and cross-cultural system can sometimes seem unreasonable, but we take this unreasonableness as a precious opportunity to learn from one another, communicate, grow, encounter a deeper God we didn't know before, experience grace, and draw closer to Him.

A few years ago, changes in immigration laws put many pastors in our Conference and others in difficult situations. In our Conference alone, about 20 pastors faced challenges, and if you include their spouses and children, that's around 50 to 60 people affected. Helping these struggling pastors isn't easy and costs a lot, so from some perspectives, it might seem more reasonable to focus on other ministries instead. But our Annual Conference, like the good shepherd who leaves to find one lost sheep, hasn't given up on these pastors and has continued to help and support them.

Last month, with the Conference's help, I applied for a working visa called an H-1B. On Thursday morning, after finishing a CLAMA meeting, I stepped out and saw a voicemail from Rev. Barb on my phone. When I listened, she had good news—my application had been chosen. I wanted to shout "Hallelujah!" because I was so happy, but at the same time, knowing that the selection rate is only 10% and that out of about 500,000 applicants this year, 450,000 are still in an uncertain future, my heart felt heavy. As heavy as my heart is, I will keep praying for them.

Friends, we sometimes find ourselves at a crossroads between the reasonable and the unreasonable. At times, following Jesus and living out our faith can feel unreasonable. But in today's passage, Mary poured costly perfume on Jesus's feet and wiped them with her hair. Some called it a waste, some thought it irrational. Yet Jesus understood her actions more deeply than anyone and even honored her love.

The world is always calculating, rational, weighing profit and loss. But the love of God's kingdom is sometimes revealed in unreasonable, incomprehensible ways. Like a mother's sacrifice, like the heart that buys flowers, like the long journey to walk a loved one home—that love might seem foolish, but it's the power that transforms us most deeply.

When was the last time you showed that kind of "unreasonable love"? Or when did you last receive such love from someone? This week, what if we became people who, like Mary, practiced a love that doesn't make sense but is true? It's okay if the world doesn't understand. Jesus does. And that love is never in vain.