

## Leben mit Spannung

**(Naomi's 1st sermon in Germany, Translated to English, Presented on 4/3/2022)**

November 7, 1940. The Tacoma Narrows Bridge in Tacoma, Washington, USA, opened barely four months before, wildly sways and “gallops” in 68 km per hour winds. This bridge, nicknamed “Galloping Gertie,” can no longer handle the strain. Motorists are urged off the bridge and escorted a safe distance away and they watch helplessly as the bridge twists, turns, curls, and sways in the wind. “No structure of concrete and steel can stand such a strain,” says the voiceover from the newsreel of the event. “Steel girders buckle and cables snap like puny twigs. There it goes!”

For over two years now, people around the world have been struggling to find a new balance for their lives while dealing with the major tensions of life in the times of Covid-19. Questions such as “how many people from how many households will be at a certain event?” and “what can we do to spend time together, but still maintain our distance?” or “how can we protect the ones we care about, but still do the things we need to do in order to take care of our own mental health?” are questions that most, if not all of us, have faced on multiple occasions within the last two years. And since the rollout of the 3G, 2G, and 2G+ rules, many of us have also had to deal with the awkwardness of asking someone to verify that they are “safe” enough to come into a building or attend an activity of some sort, or we’ve struggled to know when and how to ask someone to “please wear your mask properly,” another awkward encounter we’d probably rather avoid.

Whether we like it or not, tension and awkwardness are part of everyday life. Sometimes tension can be a good thing, perhaps pushing us to step outside of our comfort zones and do something we wouldn’t have otherwise done. But tension can also be a not so good thing, causing us so much stress that we struggle to breathe, to act, or to make simple decisions. Tension stretches us. And sometimes when things, or even people, are stretched too tightly, they snap, like the Tacoma Narrows Bridge did.

Each of us reacts in a different way to tension, and some of us can deal with more tension than others.

Have you ever found yourself in a social situation that suddenly, almost out of nowhere, got very awkward? Did you react to this awkwardness in a way you later regretted?

Imagine this: you’re part of a team, and you and your teammates and some good friends have been invited over to an acquaintance’s house for a holiday meal. You’re all sitting around the table, engaging in conversation whilst enjoying good food. There are some people in the area who want your team captain dead, so coming here had been a bit risky, perhaps, but no one’s thinking about that now—as if by some sort of unspoken agreement, everyone is purposely not thinking about this elephant that is in the room. And then suddenly a woman comes in and crawls under the table to your team captain’s feet. She starts crying, getting your team captain’s feet wet, so she pulls some pins out of her hair, so that her long locks are flowing freely, and then she uses her hair to dry the tears off of his feet. Then, as if that display weren’t enough, she opens a jar of perfumed oil and

starts massaging your team captain's feet with the oil. The smell of the perfume overwhelms all the food smells in the room, and you can feel the atmosphere in the room switch from loose and enjoyable to uptight and uncertain.

You feel embarrassed for your friend, though truth be told, he seems to just be taking everything in his stride. After what seems like an eternity of watching this unusual and unexpected encounter take place, you finally can't handle the awkwardness anymore, so you decide to speak up. "Enough already! Why are you doing this? Why do we need to witness this intimacy? And why are you wasting your money on such costly oil, woman, when your money could be put to so many other good uses?"

Unfortunately, your efforts to bring an end to the awkwardness seem to have created an even more intensely awkward atmosphere in the room. You feel the heat rise up in your cheeks, realizing that you just caused a huge scene. Your friend calmly explains that this woman has not wasted her money; in fact, she was really doing him a favor, because although there will always be poor people in the world, he won't be in this world for much longer. Now you're just embarrassed and confused, and the tension in the room is even tighter than before. Why oh why did you open your mouth and say something? If only you could have just dealt with the unexpected and awkward display of affection and not said anything at all!

The story presented to us in John 12:1-8 is not just a story of a typical dinner party turned suddenly very awkward and uncomfortable, but also a story of an extravagant display of love and gratitude, and a story of a group of people willing to gather together despite the risks.

This story takes place not too long after Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead (some experts estimate it was about two months later), and Jewish authorities at this point were more than fed up with not just Jesus, but Lazarus as well.

Jesus could have chosen to stay away from Bethany, to not accept Simon's dinner invitation and hope that things might calm down after a little more time away... But he didn't. I'm sure he probably received a bit of pushback from some of his disciples when he decided to travel towards Bethany again, but at this point his disciples had been with him for several years, so they probably didn't push too hard against Jesus's decision.

And because Jesus decides to accept the risks associated with coming back to the Bethany area, Mary chose to display her love and gratitude for him in an extravagant way. I mean, Jesus did a pretty big favor for her and Martha, raising Lazarus from the dead. Somehow a simple "thank you" or even just a thank-you card doesn't seem quite good enough for such a huge act... I don't know how Mary felt as she crouched before Jesus's feet, clutching a jar of expensive perfumed oil. Maybe she had planned to do this, and then had second thoughts, suddenly feeling awkward about what she was going to do. Maybe she had to give herself a pep talk on the evening of the dinner, reminding herself why she wanted to do this in the first place. I know if I were in Mary's shoes, I probably would have

felt a bit self-conscious at some point. But then again, maybe not. Sometimes we do crazy things for the people we love, and we don't care what other people think!

I wonder how Judas felt, witnessing Mary express her love and gratitude for Jesus by anointing his feet with expensive perfumed oil? Did he feel awkward? Or was he maybe a bit jealous, too? John describes Judas as a thief, someone who cared more about taking care of himself than taking care of the poor. Perhaps Judas was jealous that such an expensive item would be used for Jesus, but not for him. He probably felt fairly important just by being one of Jesus's disciples, but perhaps he was hungry for more power, more recognition. And Mary's unusual, extravagant display of affection and gratitude for Jesus was not only awkward for him to witness, but somehow felt like a threat to the way of life Judas had become accustomed to. Judas has control of the communal purse. But now Mary has gone and done something out of his realm of control, and spent an exorbitant amount of money on something that was then used in a rather outlandish way... Perhaps this was a tipping point for Judas, when he made up his mind that Jesus wasn't going to be the powerful person he thought he would be, because he put up with such an outlandish display from a woman. Just a chapter later, in John chapter 13, Judas strikes out on his own, leaving Jesus and the other disciples and seeking out the Jewish leaders and earn the reward promised for anyone helping to capture Jesus.

As much as we may not want to admit it, many of us would have probably reacted to Mary's actions in much a similar fashion as Judas. Maybe not for all of the same reasons, but we Mennonites tend to take a (humble) pride in being thrifty people. Who would think of spending 300 € on perfume, when you can buy something just about as good for 30 €? Think of all you could do with the 270 € you saved! After all, Jesus calls us to love and take care of those around us, regardless of how they treat us in return.

But the interesting thing in this story is, that Jesus doesn't say "Stimmt. Da hast du rechts." Instead, he justifies Mary in how she has decided to spend her money. "Let her keep the oil, so that she can use it for my burial. The poor will always be here. I, on the other hand, won't." So effectively, Jesus doesn't help lessen the tension of the moment, but rather intensifies it.

The story ends here, so we don't know how (or if) the tension and awkward situations of this particular dinner party are ever resolved. But even though we can only imagine how the situation ends, there are a few things we can takeaway from this story. One is that there's a tension between being thrifty and showering someone you love with extravagant gifts. Yes, it's good to be thrifty sometimes, but it's also okay to occasionally splurge on extravagant gifts for those close to us. Mary chose to express her love and gratitude for Jesus in a grandiose, albeit awkward, manner, after Jesus raised her brother from the dead. Also, this story serves as a good reminder that some things may never go exactly as planned, and that's okay. I'm sure Simon had never expected such an unusual event to take place during his dinner party. Probably the worst he was expecting was that the Jewish leaders would find out that Jesus was there, and they would get the soldiers to come barging into the house to arrest him...

We are entering into a time of tension. Both in the Christian calendar and in our day-to-day life. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday, where Jesus's arrival into Jerusalem is celebrated by a large crowd of people. But it's not long thereafter where celebrations turn to disappointment and anger and then to immense grief, before finally turning to a mixture of shock, amazement, and joy. Although it's tempting to skip through this emotionally-charged period of time, we are invited to sit in this tension for a while, to allow ourselves to be stretched, so that that we might be able to grow.

In our day-to-day life, we are entering into a new period where the rules and guidelines we need to abide by will no longer be constantly changing. Some people have welcomed this news, but others are still a bit wary. Each of us will have to learn anew what tensions they can live with, and which tensions are a bit too much for them to handle. I encourage us to have grace with one another during the coming weeks, as we transition from one reality to another. We have all been stretched and challenged during the last two years, and because no two of us are built exactly the same, we all need slightly different support structures to help keep us standing.

At the end of the newsreel on the collapse of the Tacoma Narrows Bridge, the voiceover explains that engineers are divided as to why the bridge failed, but "whatever the reason, Tacoma will rebuild! This time a bridge that will not provide a super thrill in the news."

It took lots of time and study, but finally, ten years later, in 1950, a new Tacoma Narrows Bridge opened. The bridge is still standing and in use today.