

# “She Has Done What She Could”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – April 5, 2020*

Palm / Passion Sunday

Mark 11:1-11

Rev. John Wahl

Mark 14:3-9

All four gospels tell the story of a woman anointing Jesus with costly perfume, but the specific details in each version are different. In John’s Gospel, the woman is Mary – the sister of Martha and Lazarus – three of Jesus’ closest companions. In the very chapter after Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead – as he emerges from the tomb still smelling like death – Mary fills the room with the scent of perfume offered as a sign of gratitude and devotion.

In Mark’s version of the anointing, it is the last week of Jesus’ earthly life, “two days before the Passover,” Tuesday of Holy Week; and we find Jesus having dinner in the home of Simon the leper. We are not told much about Simon, but most likely he is someone whom Jesus healed of leprosy. Still, he is known as “the leper.” To the very end of his life, Jesus crosses boundaries, here sharing a meal with someone from whom other religious leaders would have been sure to keep their distance.

Then, another boundary is crossed. A woman shows up unannounced, breaks open a jar of expensive, fragrant oil, and pours it over Jesus’s head. We’re not told whether this woman was a member of the household or whether she crashed the party. We don’t know what moves her to perform such an act of devotion; or where she got this expensive gift. We don’t even know her name.

Some of Jesus’ dinner companions are offended by an act of such extravagance. That jar of nard – valued at a whole year’s worth of wages – could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Their objection has merit: why waste this whole jar of ointment in one act of devotion, when so much good could have been done with the money it was worth?<sup>1</sup>

While others are scolding this woman, Jesus comes to her defense. “Why do you trouble her,” he asks. “She has performed a good service for me. You always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish, but you will not always have me.” This response is similar to Jesus’ reply in Mark 2, when he is asked why his disciples do not fast like the disciples of John the

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<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Johnson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

Baptist or the Pharisees, and Jesus says, “The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.”

Jesus calls this act of devotion an anointing of his body for its burial. As we recognize each Holy Week, the time of his death is drawing near. In Mark, just before this story of the dinner at Simon’s home, we hear that the chief priests and scribes are plotting against Jesus, “looking for a way to arrest him by stealth and kill him.” Immediately following this dinner scene, we learn that Judas Iscariot goes to the chief priests and agrees to betray Jesus to them in exchange for money.

So this loving act of devotion by an unnamed woman stands in stark contrast to the sinister plot developing around Jesus. Her costly, precious, sweet-smelling gift prepares Jesus for what he faces in the coming few days. And, Jesus says, “whenever the good news is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.” By including this story in the account of Jesus’ last week of earthly life, the author of Mark has assured that she will indeed be remembered.

As we remember her act of devotion this Holy Week, we – like her – are searching for ways that our actions can make a lasting difference in the world. And yet, in the middle of so much horrible news of so much impending death, we largely feel unable to help in the ways that we might want to. While we hear about – or maybe even know – people who are bravely serving on the front lines in this battle against COVID-19, we are all looking for our own meaningful ways to have an impact on our community members who are struggling. We know that there are people who are alone, or who are hungry, or who are grieving, but it is hard to know how we can put our energies, resources, and love to their best use.

Although it may seem simple, I would encourage you to reach out to one another during this time. Text, call, write a note, or send a card of encouragement. If you have asked your neighbor if they need help and they said not now, ask them again. If you are aware of someone who has lost their job and all or some income because of the shutdown, ask them how you can help.

It may be important to note that, in his response to those who criticize the woman who anoints him, Jesus’ remark about the poor uses the present rather than the future tense. “You always have the poor with you,” he says, “and you can do good for them whenever you wish.” Too often, this verse has been referenced as though the verb is future tense – “you *will* always have the poor with you” – as though to throw up our hands and say that poverty can never be solved; to excuse

inaction on behalf of the poor. Jesus offers no such excuse. Instead, he says in the present tense, “you can do good for them whenever you wish.”

Sometimes, criticizing how others use their resources – as some of the dinner guests do to this woman with her jar of ointment – serves as a deflection from examining our own lack of generosity. Perhaps this is the problem that Jesus sees in his dinner companions’ objections. He points out that they are not lacking in opportunities for helping others; they are free to go ahead and get to work. But, as for this woman, she should be left alone; for she has performed a good and beautiful service.

There are things that we can do – and are doing – to help those in need. This week, we delivered a carload of food, paper products and cleaning supplies – dropped off at the church by some of you – to the Chagrin Falls Park Community Center as they are continuing to deliver to clients in need. We also received a note from North Presbyterian Church who is working to support their church members and others in unstable housing situations. These are only two of the ways that our congregation is supporting people in during this especially difficult time.

But maybe we are also meant to hear in today’s text that there are other good and beautiful things that we might be doing during this time as well. The anointing of Jesus was an intimate, personal act; covering Jesus and filling the room with the scent of the ointment.

Rudyard Kipling wrote: “Smells are surer than sounds or sights / To make your heart-strings crack.”<sup>2</sup> Most of us have experienced smells that flood the mind with memories of some person, place, or event. Our sense of smell relates closely to how we experience life and process significant memories. Odors – foul or sweet – can stop us in our tracks; whether the smell of a roaring fire or cookies baking in the oven or food rotting in a dumpster. The unnamed woman’s gift emits an aroma that saturates the nose and the minds of everyone in it. And for Christians, the real-life experience of Jesus’ death and resurrection – and its implications for the ways we love and serve – is forever implanted in our mind, like a scent that will never forget.

As much as we might want to want to be making an impact these days; helping those who are struggling physically, emotionally, or financially, we also need to think about how to live out the ultimate hope of Holy Week in the midst of our current crisis. What are the ways that we can help to bring beauty before our

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Matt Skinner from *WorkingPreacher.com*

eyes or the eyes of others? How can we bring the promise of springtime's coming bloom into our lives and those of our neighbors? In what ways can the promise of the empty tomb – the realization that new light and life comes after the passion's darkness – keep us going through this time when we are apart and inundated constantly with tragic news?

And if God can create a memorable and beautiful act of devotion through someone like this unnamed woman, whom might God work through next? Each of us might be invited to care for our neighbor, to offer a listening ear, to stand up for those who are less fortunate, to offer an alternative narrative to the one we are hearing. What we do know is that God surprises us with whom God can use, and – through them – what God can accomplish.<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes, these acts of beauty and devotion are dismissed as wasteful. Jesus praises this woman who anoints him because her loving act reflects the divine love that his life, death and rising makes real for us. It is a love that holds nothing back, a love can seem scandalous; a love that is costly and lavish. And we love, because God first loved us. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> David Lose, "The Unexpected God"