

The Woman and the Perfume

Mark 14:3-9

Good Morning Church Family,

Today is Palm Sunday, the day that Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a young donkey. The day in the Christian calendar that marks the beginning of Holy Week, the beginning of what we call the Passion of Christ.

When one reads the gospels, any of the gospels, there is a sense of foreshadowing, a sense of storm clouds gathering in the distance as we move towards the end Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. Jesus knows his death is coming, and the gospel writers let us in on that too. The more teachings Jesus gives, the more miracles Jesus performs, the more we read the phrase, and the religious leaders grumbled...considered a way to rid themselves of Jesus...plotted to kill Jesus." Jesus, makes more and more references to his own death and to the impact that will have on everything. The disciples seem frustratingly clueless about it all; they are the first to answer questions and the last to have any real understanding.

In Mark Chapter 11, we read the traditional Palm Sunday passage, which is Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem as the crowd shouts Hosanna! Jesus comes not in power, but in gentleness. Not as a conquering King, but as a humble servant. After this

event, the storm clouds move in closer. Jesus's teachings take a darker turn, a desperation enters the picture as he hopes to impart to the disciples, his best friends, what is coming. In Mark chapter 13:24-27, Jesus says this to the 12, "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. "Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels and gather the [a] elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven." and then in Chapter 14 of Mark, verses 1-3, which is just before the passage Roger read to us this morning, says this, "It was two days before the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him, for they said, "Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people." The plot to kill Jesus is now troublingly specific and present.

And then, in the midst of these frightening prophecies and murder plots we find the beautiful, wild story of a woman who empties a bottle of perfume all over Jesus. It's two days before the passover, two days before the last meal that Jesus will eat with his followers. He's at the home of Simon the Leper, having a meal with friends, including the 12 disciples. We know this is a special meal because the verses tell us that Jesus is "reclining" not just "sitting." Suddenly, a woman enters the dining room, where it was likely that only men would have been sitting. She walks over to Jesus, breaks open a bottle of extremely expensive oil, and pours the entire contents of the bottle over Jesus' head. The others in the room are astonished, what exactly just happened here? Why is

Jesus seemingly so fine with this happening to him? The people in the room object, “What are you doing!?” They respond to the audacity of this woman. I imagine Jesus shoots them a look, and they cover their incredulity with a reasonable, pious comment. “This is a waste! Do you know how expensive this oil is? It could have been sold and helped the poor! (The Subtext: See Jesus, we are listening to you! Aren’t you impressed?) For his part, Jesus is not at all impressed by it. He says, “Leave her alone! Why are you shaming her? She has done a good and beautiful thing for me. The poor can be helped at any time, but don’t you realize that I’m not here much longer? She has given everything; she has anointed my body for burial. I promise you that wherever the good news is told from now on, they will remember this woman and what she has done for me.”

It’s those final words of Jesus that struck me as I was preparing my sermon for this week- that this woman and her actions will be remembered and talked about everywhere that the gospel touches. Her story is memorialized in all four of the gospels-Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Which begs the question-why? What is so meaningful, so significant about this that she is one of the very few women whose story appears in all four of the gospels? What are we, as the church here and now, to remember about the woman and her jar of perfume? That’s what we’re going to explore together during our Palm Sunday worship.

First, this woman creates beauty, and that is a good, sacred thing. In the original Hebrew, Mark has two different words that are both often translated as “good” in

English. One word focuses on the rightness of action, “you did a good thing, you did the right thing in that situation.” The other word focuses on beauty. “This is a good thing, this is a beautiful thing”, and it’s the second word that Jesus uses when honouring this woman. The woman did not pause to seek moral justification for her action; Jesus is this a moral, righteous thing to do; she simply expressed her devotion to Jesus. Jesus says “this was a beautiful thing that you did for me.”

Now, I am a practical person, to a fault. Taylor is the one who creates beauty in the aesthetics of our home. “That lamp doesn’t look good where it is.” “Who cares? It works.” “I care, Emily.” A shocking discovery, not everyone thinks like I do! Really, though, I’m so thankful for Taylor, and others who create beauty in this world. Whether it’s the people in my life that I know personally, or authors, poets, and artists. There is something holy about co-creating with the one who created beauty, about making or doing something beautiful for beauty’s own sake. More and more, I realize the world has enough terrible things in it, enough violence, enough hard, let’s take as much beauty as we can. I think that’s part of what Jesus is saying here, the coming days are going to be so dark and bewildering; let’s grab on to every bit of light that we can.

The second reason we should remember this woman is that her timing is right. The opportunity to minister to Jesus will not last long; remember that we know Jesus will be dead within a few days; this woman has picked the right time to minister to him. We should be careful Jesus is not saying, “Forget the poor; they can wait!”. Time and again in his ministry Jesus healed the poor on the spot, tended to the needs of the crowd right

then and there. Often when this scripture is quoted, people will say, “You WILL always have the poor with you,” as though it is some prescriptive prophecy. As though Jesus is saying, “Try as you might, you’ll never solve poverty!”, but the verse actually says “for you always have the poor with you.” It’s a subtle push to the disciples of why don’t you then go out and use your money for the poor, before you judge this woman for her choices. Consider your own actions, is the implication of Jesus’ comment about the poor. Something that we as modern day readers can consider for ourselves. But today, this woman has given to Jesus, the poorest of the poor, the one who will completely empty himself for humanity in the coming days.

Thirdly, She identifies with Jesus’ death and she anticipates the resurrection. This woman saw what all of the disciples seemed to miss, that Jesus’ was drawing close to the Valley of the Shadow of Death. She felt compelled to do this thing for Jesus, and whether or not she understood exactly what was to happen in the coming days, Jesus views her actions through that understanding. Jesus interprets her anointing as for his burial. Unlike the twelve disciples, this woman acts in a way that is consistent with Jesus’ prediction that he would suffer and die.

Further, she anticipates the resurrection. Again, this is not her intention that we know of, but Jesus clarifies to the people at the supper table and to us that she has anointed him beforehand. It will turn out that this is the only kind of anointing possible. Three other devoted women will attempt to anoint Jesus’ body afterward, but they arrive too late. In their planning, they did not anticipate a resurrection. This woman's actions communicate

to Jesus, you are loved and you will be missed. It is a profound act of relational love offered in a room of men who seemed only concerned with the waste of a costly perfume.

Another reason that we can and should remember this woman, which ties directly to our Palm Sunday worship, is that she is anointing a King. She is anointing the King. Mark's readers cannot help but see another significance to her action. Jesus has entered Jerusalem as king. He will be crucified as a king, his cross will bear a sign that declares him king of the Jews. Uncomprehending crowds and rejecting opponents alike "proclaim" Jesus as the King, the Messiah, the Anointed One. This woman is the only person in Mark who anoints Jesus!

At the start of this sermon, we talked about how on Palm Sunday we remember Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. How Jesus came not a conquering King, but as a humble servant. Not in a show of great power and dominion, but in gentleness and into community. These actions are often noted as ways that Jesus communicates to the Jews and to us that his Kingdom will be different, that his Kingdom is one of love for neighbors. And the anointing that this woman offers is another communication to us about what kind of Kingdom this will be. When other Jewish kings had been anointed in the past, like King Saul or King David, the anointing was done by a prophet or other religious leader. It was an auspicious sort of thing, the implication being that God had chosen that person to rule on their behalf. But here! We see a woman, someone whose gender would have set her at the margins, someone whom the disciples had just

scolded for her hospitality, her offering, her act of love, being the one to offer the anointing. Maybe I'm reaching here, but to me this seems like a symbol that the gospel, the good news about Jesus Christ is about to run wild. The message, the work, will be entrusted to those on the margins, those who don't quite know proper decorum, those who love and give themselves to Jesus with utter abandon. This is a kingdom built on a scrappy community of followers, a new world where all are welcome, where all believers are priests.

Finally, and perhaps most poignantly, this woman offers her love to Jesus with reckless abandon, with total excess, with lavishness. Her gesture serves as a metaphor for what God is like. Her action is an echo of what the Kingdom of God looks like.

Have you ever seen something, heard about something, or read something that made you stop and say, "ah, that's just what God is like." "That just how heaven will be," "that's the Kingdom of God, right there." I know I have. I think of our Langham Days Eccumenical Service a couple of years ago, when it was held at St Mark's Catholic Parish. People from all denominations gathered in the pews. Emily Carr was playing the guitar alongside Issak, and Jean, or as Emily always called her Saint Jean, in her 90s, singing with them. And we're all belting out Johnny Cash's Folsom Prison Blues, and laughing, and swaying and I thought, surely this is a glimpse of what Heaven must be like.

Or my friend, Cheryl, who lives in South Korea was telling me about how her Grade 4 Son, Rohan, is worship leader at their church this month, how he's finding other kids to

read the scriptures, and play piano, and he's picking an a different translation of the scripture because the other one felt too hard to read in English, and people are telling him that it feels like a fresh story again. And a little child shall lead them.

I read a beautiful novel recently called *The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store* by McBride. The story centers around a dilapidated community outside Philadelphia called Chicken Hill where a community of African Americans and Jews live. It talks about how their lives are intertwined, how they choose goodness and their neighbors over and over again. How they risk everything to rescue a disabled young boy. Isn't that what community is? I imagine many of you have stories like that tucked into your hearts as well.

That's what this story of the Woman and her Jar of Perfume feels like to me. A harbinger of the Kingdom, a glimpse of the world yet to come. In the coming week, Jesus will pour himself out in love, in lavishness, with reckless abandon. He will offer himself fully, he'll pour himself for those who think they are deserving and for those who know they are not. There will be no distinction. No frugality. Jesus will live out that love in the coming days.

Friends, who is adding beauty to your life? Who is declaring Jesus King? What unexpected places is the Good News of Jesus showing up? Where can we lavish love? It's my hope that as we enter this Passion week together, we'll go in with eyes wide

open, with deep hope and unfailing love as our guides.

Amen.