

Mark 14:1-15:47

14:1 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;

14:2 for they said, "Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people."

14:3 While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head.

14:4 But some were there who said to one another in anger, "Why was the ointment wasted in this way?"

14:5 For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor." And they scolded her.

14:6 But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me.

14:7 For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me.

14:8 She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial.

14:9 Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

Proclamation of the Word

The gospel of Mark is full of Jesus' encounters with unnamed folks- supporting actors with bit parts, not major characters like disciples. Some of Jesus' best ministry was among people that have no names, but we recall the work of God through and in them. They are like the pop up ads on your computer. They are not the main event, but we cannot ignore them. Today we remember her, a minor character, the one who anointed Jesus' body for burial and poured out extravagant love. She pops up right here before the Last Supper and after the Palm Sunday procession.

Mark tells us about this unnamed woman- a huge contrast to all that was going on around her. Mark Chapter 14 is about Christ's impending death, suffering, and passion. Everyone around Jesus is plotting death- remember the religious leaders are scared- scared of Rome and decide to make Jesus the sacrificial lamb, so Rome doesn't lash out against them all. So they plot a stealthy plan to kill him on trumped up charges. The disciples will cave to fear, too. In the garden of Gethsemane, the disciples can't stay awake with Jesus. Peter denies him. Judas betrays him. The soldiers will follow orders and beat him. The crowds will mock him and spit on him. Fear is getting the best of them. And fear does terrible things to people. She is different than all these.

Here sandwiched in the middle of the death dealing is this demonstration of faith and love. Today we remember her. In the face of fear-mongering, she comes with an alabaster jar filled with expensive nard, and extravagantly wastes it all over Jesus' head- as if he were a King. His death has touched her, but instead of fear, she chooses love. We do not know how Jesus has touched her, but we know from her act of love, that it has changed her. She enters into the death of Jesus, and will be transformed into the new life, the resurrection, God offers. She responds with a gift of unimaginable cost and grace. She honors Jesus.

And remember we will. Sometimes called the patron saint of Hospice care, the woman prophetically prepared Jesus' body for burial. Jesus must have thought, "She really gets it." In the ancient near east, the most important people were anointed with oil and perfumes, then the container or flask broken to bits so that no one else could use it and buried with the body. So the fact that she broke the jar signifies to the others, the high honor she was showing Jesus.

While the naysayers get a slap on the wrist for their false piety, she receives praise from Jesus. Jesus comments that the poor will always be with you. The Law requires people of faith to be responsible for the care of the poor (Deut. 15:11).

Jesus contrasts their false piety with her gift of love.

In the NIV translation Jesus says, she has done a beautiful thing. The word Jesus uses does mean lovely, beautiful, as well as good. She gave it all. Just like the widow who earlier puts two copper coins in the Temple treasury while no one is watching, except Jesus. She gave it all. Jesus sees and praises her for pouring out her life for God and for others. Jesus gave it all. These unnamed women show forth the image of God by their giving and love. Jesus points to them as the example. God takes the lovely, broken gifts, and honors them in return.

All who serve in love the same way, honor Jesus. As we walk with Jesus towards the Cross this week, we remember that she was foreshadowing his great act of love, his own life poured out. It had always been his way...

- Instead of riding a war horse into Jerusalem, he rode a humble donkey,
- Instead of living in a palace, he was born in a manger;
- Instead of fraternizing with only those of status, he ate with sinners, lepers, outsiders, women, and children.
- Instead of wielding a sword, he came armed with love.

That's what caused the trouble. God's love was a threat. He was speaking of lifting up the poor, healing the sick, setting captives free. Jesus was dangerous. This kind of love is what got him killed. We are called to risky acts of love. It may not be popular, but it just might be faithful.

My colleague Dan Holloway reminds us,

"The Bible rightly reminds us that our calling as Christian people is not so much to conform as it is to be distinctive. Our calling as followers of the Christ is sometimes to imagine a different way of living together, a different way of shaping our common life, a different way of bearing testimony to our faith. And given our current context, I wonder if one of the ways we do this is by being distinctive in the ways we relate to people who aren't like us, who don't think like us, and who perhaps don't look like us."ⁱ

I wonder if one of the ways we demonstrate our faith is by relating to one another in that same humility and grace, pouring ourselves out for one another.

The Christ hymn of Philippians reads:

Philippians 2:5-11

2:5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

2:6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,

2:7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,

2:8 he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross.

2:9 Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,

2:10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

2:11 and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Dr. Scott Peck, in his book *The Different Drum; Community Making and Peace*,ⁱⁱ tells of a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Once a great order, as a result of waves of anti-monastic persecution in the 17th and 18th centuries and the rise of secularism in the 19th, all its branch houses were lost and it had become decimated to the extent that there were only 5 monks left in the decaying mother house: the abbot and four others, all over 70 in age. Clearly it was a dying order.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. Through their many years of prayer and contemplation the old monks had become a bit psychic, so they could always sense when the rabbi was in his hermitage. "The rabbi is in the woods, the rabbi is in the woods again." they would whisper to each other. As he agonized over the

imminent death of his order, it occurred to the abbot at one such time to visit the hermitage and ask the rabbi if by some possible chance he could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. "I know how it is," he would exclaimed, "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and quietly spoke of

deep things.

The time came when the abbot had to leave. They embraced each other. "It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years," the abbot said, "but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?"

"No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monk's gathered around him to ask, "Well, what did the rabbi say?"

"He couldn't help," the abbot answered. "We just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving - it was something cryptic - was that the Messiah is one of us. I don't know what he meant."

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the rabbi's words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, which one? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right, often very right. Maybe the rabbi means Brother Elred. But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah. Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for You, could I?

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off, off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it,

they sensed this aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the 5 old monks and seemed to radiate out from something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place, and their friends brought their friends.

Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery came to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while, one asked if he could join them. Then another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and faith in the realm.

A dying monastery raise to new life with the help of a Jewish rabbi. Sound familiar?

Jesus said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."
(John 13:35)

My friends, the Messiah is among us. The image of God is in each one of us. Let's pour out ourselves for one another in remembrance of her and in honor of Jesus. Maybe this is the way Jesus saves us.

ⁱ Holloway, Dan, "On Being Purple People," 2/27/2018 pinnacleresourcescongregations.blogspot.com .

ⁱⁱ Peck, Scott, M. M.D., *The Different Drum; Community Making and Peace*, (New York, Touchstone, 1987).