

money, especially in churches, saying “There are the great debates around...stained glass windows or expensive art on the church parlor walls or bringing the decor of fellowship hall into the twenty-first century, or at least the twentieth century. What about an elevator? Extravagance or a necessity for welcoming those with mobility challenges? And then there are the mission trips to faraway places. Does the cost justify the service or are we better off sending a check?”³

There are no easy answers to those questions. Or maybe there are lots of right answers to those particular questions, because all of those things can be worthy. Serving the poor *and* blessing Jesus are both worthy actions. But Jesus praised the woman for what she did for him, in that holy week. Jesus implies that we must discern what action a particular moment calls for. We need to use our hearts, our faith, and our minds to discern wisely. Jesus, the one who came to reveal God and God’s kingdom, was headed for his death. At *that* moment, the time was right for this extravagant anointing.

And so we are invited to discern what the world around us needs today, what God would have us do, in this moment. Is our world in need of big, bold, actions to bless God and others who are suffering, or even facing death? Is our community in need of actions that subvert the status quo, even when we put ourselves at risk to do so? Is the world in need of congregations that create relationships and nurture spirituality? Is the world in need of works of art that move us and places that create sacred space? Is the world in need of generosity toward the poor and actions that create just economics for all?

The answer is, of course, yes. Yes to all of those things. Some of them will be things I can do. Some of them are things you can do, as each of us think about our gifts, our lives, our skills. And like the couple who acted on their chance to bless the lawyers, like the woman who took the risk of using her whole jar of expensive ointment, we are called to go ahead and act, not counting the cost. We don’t want to miss the moment.

You and I cannot anoint Jesus for his death. But we can live with Jesus’ death and resurrection in the front of our minds, especially this week, and that awareness can help us discern how to act in this moment, in a world full of need.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



March 24, 2024

Palm Sunday

“Act Boldly; Bless God”

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Mark 14:3-9

On this Palm Sunday, we have now entered holy week—the day we begin in praise and hope, waving our palms. And that ends with Jesus’ crucifixion and burial. We start with those shouts of hosanna, which mean “save us!” People who saw Jesus coming into the city of Jerusalem were hopeful. They anticipated all that Jesus would do to help them, to bring them freedom from the government who oppressed them, to invite them into fullness of life. Their hopes were weighty. It was a lot to lay on one person’s shoulders. Those hopes for what Jesus would do were both absolutely appropriate—he would bring freedom and joy. But they were also completely misplaced—the salvation he would bring looked like nothing like they imagined.

Jesus had given signals throughout his ministry about what he was up to, sometimes speaking quite plainly about what they could expect from him. He had made clear since the beginning that he was ushering in a new realm, a new moment, a new experience of God’s presence and power in the world. But he also kept showing them that that new realm didn’t look like they expected. From the moment he was baptized by John, we and the disciples saw Jesus’ humility on display. Son of God that he was, Jesus submitted himself to that ritual of cleansing and faith at the hand of John. Throughout his ministry, he also kept telling his friends to stay quiet about him until the right moment had come. Jesus was not a fame-seeking figure, not a populist preacher or a general with a powerful army backing him up. Jesus eventually made it clear what was coming to do. Time and again he told his disciples that he would be arrested, handed over, and killed. Though after three days he would rise again. And in what we know as the Palm Sunday story, he entered the city on a small colt. Not a war-horse, but a small colt that had never been ridden. His mission was about using humility, love, and peace to transform the world.

So the people had their hopes in the right place when they shouted hosanna! But they had not yet grasped what the outcome of that hope would really look like. The disciples, the crowds could not understand how their hosannas’ would transform into shouts of something much more sinister: words to betray him, words to deny knowing him, shout to crucify him. We are told of only one person who seemed to understand where Jesus’ story was headed. And we don’t even know her name.

Mark 14:3-9: While Jesus 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. But some were there who said to

1 Recounted in Laura van Dernoot Lipsky, *The Age of Overwhelm: Strategies for the Long Haul*, (Barret-Koehler, 2018), 9.

2 William Placher, *Mark* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 196.

3 Jill Duffield, *Lent in Plain Sight* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2020), 122.

one another in anger, 'Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.' And they scolded her. But Jesus said, 'Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. 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. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. 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.'

Author Malcolm Gladwell tells the story of Vernon Jordan and other civil rights attorneys who were in Georgia in 1961 defending a young black man in court.¹ They were in town for a long period and, as black men themselves, they endured demeaning treatment and bigotry. When court adjourned each day for lunch, the attorneys went to sit in their car to eat cold bologna sandwiches. All while the judge, opposing lawyers, and the court officials dined together at the white-only restaurant on the town square. One afternoon, Vernon Jordan was approached in the courthouse entry by a quiet woman who invited him and his fellow lawyers to skip the bologna sandwiches and come to her house for lunch. At her home, she and her neighbors set a beautiful table and laid it with an elaborate meal. I imagine the table was set with silver and china, pitchers of sweet iced tea, and delicious homemade salads and desserts. Jordan recalls that the woman's husband offered a blessing, in which he said, "Lord, way down here in Tattnall County, we can't join the NAACP, but thanks to your bountiful blessings, we can feed the NAACP lawyers."

That meal was a beautiful act of hospitality and caring. In the segregated south, that action was also a risk for the couple who opened their home to the lawyers and to the neighbors who sat together at the table with them. The story I read didn't say whether the couple was white or black, but my read is that they were white folks, who felt bound by bigotry and racism in their community. By hosting the lawyers for lunch, they opened themselves to ridicule and hatred, being ostracized by neighbors or fellow church members, maybe threats to their safety, or even worse. If others found out about the lunch, they would have been sure to declare the hospitality a waste. They probably would have even called the meal a disgrace. From the privilege and distance of our vantage point today, we know exactly what that meal was: a gift of grace; an alabaster jar of ointment broken open and shared; an anointing of those lawyers for their holy service.

The woman came to Jesus while he was at Simon the Leper's house. We must take note that Jesus was staying at the home of a person who, at some point, had been so sick that his illness had become part of his actual name. Perhaps Simon had been healed from his skin disease, one that was often so severe and fear of it was so great, people suffering from it were pushed right out of their society. Of course, such humility and befriending of outcasts was right in line with Jesus and the kind of mission he was on. Mark says little about the woman who came through Simon's door. This story decidedly does *not* say that the woman was a sinner, as the gospel-writer Luke does. And to be clear, nowhere in the Bible is this woman called a prostitute. Whoever she was, she understood what Jesus was about. She knew what so many had missed: Jesus was holy and blessed. He was king of kings. And still, he was going to be killed. Knowing this, she carried with her a jar of perfumed ointment, some

kind of special oil. It was precious, indeed. The cost of it—three hundred denarii—was what one laborer could expect to be paid for a whole year of work. Approaching Jesus, she broke open the jar and anointed him with sweet-smelling perfume.

Her act was big and bold. It was extravagant. This was no dabbling of fancy perfume, no measured use of something fine and precious. She didn't tip the jar to pour the oil out politely. She broke it open, demonstrating that she was giving everything to Jesus. She was holding nothing back, saving not one ounce for herself or anyone else. Every last drop was meant to bless and anoint him. As we've heard throughout Lent: give more than you expect. Offer your whole self to God. Love lavishly. The woman could not stop the arrest or betrayal of Jesus that was to come. She could not fix his situation, but she did what she could. Like the couple in Alabama who could not change the situation for the NAACP lawyers, who could not heal their divided community, they did what they could for the attorneys and did it with generous hospitality. The woman did the one thing she was able to do - anoint Jesus for his burial.

In the time of Jesus, anointing was reserved for kings, priests, and prophets. It was a ritual used to initiate their service and recognize their important role. But anointing was also what was done after death, to bless the body of one who had died. As William Placher writes, "[This woman] is symbolically both honoring him and preparing him for death. Indeed, [Jesus] is a king whose royal function is to die, a priest who is also the sacrifice, a prophet who has predicted his own death."²

The other disciples complained loudly about the woman's anointing of Jesus. "She's wasting money." "This could have raised funds for some holy purpose like caring for the poor." I'm sure most of us have said something similar about an expense we didn't agree with, whether in our city government, our church, or our own family. And certainly, money is sometimes wasted or spent without thinking. The disciples comments raise the question: what is most important? What should we spend our money on, where should we focus our actions in a broken world? Jesus has called us time and again in Mark's gospel to give away what we have to God and neighbor. And in this moment today, when we are witnessing catastrophic levels of hunger and even famine in Gaza, Haiti, and Cuba, we, too, have to consider what resources we ought to direct to those struggling for survival. It is surely the right intention to steward our monies responsibly and to care for those who are most in need.

But some experiences also bring beauty and joy into our lives; some things provide a value to us that is hard to name. Restoring nature, creating art or music, experiencing the wonders of the world, nurturing community are all actions that are blessed in God's sight. And often, those things require money, too. Sometimes a lot of it.

It's a real struggle to decide what is most worthy. And isn't it true that any amount we spend by choice could almost always be spent some different way, to benefit someone in need?

During Lent, a group of us gathered each Wednesday to talk about a book called *Lent in Plain Sight*. The author, Jill Duffield, focuses on ten different everyday objects: bread, stones, oil, shoes, among them, to help us think about our lives of faith. In the chapter on oil, she reflects on the woman anointing Jesus and the disciples' complaints. She describes the controversy around spending large sums of