

Works Ethic

It probably would not surprise you if the sermon you are about to hear was a good deal like the hymn we sang before I read the Scripture for this morning. That sermon would recapitulate the familiar story, draw some points from cultural and religious practices in first century Judaea, and end up with a (hopefully) rousing call to action in the field of social justice, probably with further reference to my work with the Poor People's Campaign this summer.

But I hate to be predictable. Some of what I have to say this morning may surprise you and I think that's OK because the stories that Jesus told and the stories about his life are often surprising as well. Just when we think we've got this whole God business all figured out, our untamed God throws us a curveball. For centuries, one of the symbols for the Holy Spirit has been the wild goose and there is good reason for that. When we think we can encapsulate the call of God on our lives into a "works ethic," a list of the positive steps we are going to take in the world on God's behalf rather than a negative list of what not to do, we find that even these noble attempts at discipleship fall short. We must be ready, my friends, to set aside our works ethic and go on the wild ride that life becomes when we seek to follow the Crucified and Risen Lord.

So, I'm going to start this morning by telling you what this story is not. First of all, it's not a story about a loose woman. You see, there are actually three different stories about Jesus being anointed by a woman in our four Gospels but in our human reluctance to deal with ambiguity and our thirst for "the real story," we Christians have tended to conflate them over the centuries, producing an amalgamated tale in which Jesus has both his head and feet anointed by Mary Magdalene, the reformed prostitute, at the home she shares with her sister Martha and brother Lazarus, only to be criticized by Judas who is not only the disciple who betrayed Jesus but also a thief. But that is not this story.

The story from Mark, which we just heard, is closely echoed by Matthew's version. In both, the woman with the perfume is anonymous, which is richly ironic when we remember Jesus' words about her: "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." In both Mark and Matthew, the story is set in the week before Jesus' betrayal and death at the home of Simon the leper, presumably one of the many sufferers of a skin disease cured by Jesus. It is only in the Gospel According to John that the story is shifted to the home of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary, also in Bethany and during the same week.

The story from which we get some of the details in our "harmonized" version is in Luke and appears to be about a completely different incident. The story in Luke, in which a sinful woman anoints Jesus' feet, rinses them with her tears and dries them with her hair, takes place in Galilee, fairly early in Jesus' ministry. There it is the Pharisees, not any of the disciples, who kick up a fuss and rather than being upset about the waste of a potential asset for helping the poor they are upset because Jesus has allowed a "harlot" to treat him intimately in public. That story is quite different although there are one or two points that we can appropriately draw from both, as I'll mention later.

One of the most mundane difficulties faced by casual readers of the New Testament is keeping all of the characters straight. There is an abundance of Johns and Marys, two of the most popular

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names not only in first century Palestine but even up to our own time. When time came to pick a name for our third child, I wanted to honor two of my close friends in college, both named John. But there were already too many John Boyers around – not only the memory of my grandfather but my half-brother and a cousin. So we went the Celtic route with Sean Boyer. And I'll bet that any of you who grew up in a place with any kind of Catholic population knew several girls with some variant of Mary in their name. Again, in my own family, my dad's wife is Mary Patricia and her sister is Mary Gabrielle and you all know Constance Marie and Colleen Marie. Likewise, Mary Magdalene is not Mary of Bethany and neither of them is the sinful woman of Luke's anointing story. Of the woman in the story told by Mark and Matthew, we know nothing, not even her name, except her extravagant action.

This is also not a story that teaches that it is OK to turn a blind eye to the poor. I wish I had a dollar for every time a politician has used Jesus's words to excuse a lack of effort on behalf of the poor of our land or any other. The resulting pot of money could probably wipe out poverty in a single step. And, believe it or not, I've heard sermons which essentially did the same thing. But I know that you all are far too knowledgeable about the Scriptures and the Way of Jesus to fall for that. You, like Jesus' disciples, undoubtedly remember Jesus' source material of Deuteronomy 15:11. It's a verse I quote often and we had an excellent Sunday School series on it a few years ago led by Rev. Charlotte Keyes using curriculum from Sojourners. Jesus quoted only the first half knowing his disciples would automatically fill in the rest: "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'"

Essentially, Jesus is saying to those who are criticizing the perceived waste of a valuable asset, "Hey, you're not wrong. It is our duty to give generously to those in need, especially when we have an excess as represented by this costly perfume." The idea of giving to the poor would have been very much on the minds of those present at the house in Bethany, whether it belonged to Simon or to Lazarus and his sisters. Both Alan Culpepper, a former professor of mine and of Rev. Keyes, who wrote the "Mark" volume in the Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary, and Aaron Gale, writing in The Jewish Annotated New Testament, point out that Passover was a traditional time for Jews to give alms to the poor. Since we know that Jesus opened his public ministry by proclaiming "good news to the poor," called the poor "blessed," and spent most of his ministry among them, we cannot possibly interpret his words here as carte blanche for any Christians to ignore those in need around them. Jesus has a lesson in mind here that is not about ministry budgets or mission plans.

In order to get at what this story is rather than what it is not, I found it useful this week to consider some of the ironies set up by the way the story is told in the Gospel According to Mark and I'm indebted in this approach to the previously noted work of Alan Culpepper for Smyth & Helwys as well as a brief note from Lawrence M. Wills in The Jewish Annotated New Testament. As I already mentioned, drawing on both of these sources, there is rich irony in the fact that Jesus recommended that this woman should always be remembered only to have his disciples neglect to pass on her name. On the one hand, it should be a negative lesson to us about the patriarchy that continues to dominate the Church as well as the world. We should never forget that not only Jesus but also Paul, who is so often accused of misogyny, valued the women who supported them, worked alongside them, and rose in Paul's eyes to the status of

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fellow apostles of Christ Jesus. Women in both Church and society are worthy of equal status, equal honor, and equal pay to their male counterparts. The fact that this woman's name has been lost should be a point of shame to the Church and a reminder to us that we still have a long way to go in loving our neighbors as our selves.

At the same time, this saint's anonymity may also remind us that what we do to help others and to serve the cause of Christ is not meant for the acclamation of human beings. Our reward is in the knowledge that we have followed the call of Jesus. So many churches, including some not so far from us, get all tangled up the legacies, tangible and otherwise, of those who've served in the past. A pretty common refrain in some churches is "well, we can't get rid of *that* – it was donated by good old so-and-so, who was a pillar of this church." Or, "we can't do *that* – our former pastor was against it." I'm grateful that I've heard those words very seldom here at Good Shepherd Baptist Church. Nor have I noticed any of you strutting and preening over a gift given or a good deed done. I offer this little bit of the lesson only as a gentle reminder.

Another point of irony in this story is how the actions of the unnamed woman are contrasted to the actions of the religious authorities and even of the disciples preceding and following this pericope. The religious authorities and the disciples are the ones that we would expect to understand and support Jesus but the chief priests and Pharisees are openly hostile to him and the disciples seem confused at every turn in Mark's Gospel. In the verses immediately before and after this story, the authorities are plotting Jesus' death. But this unknown woman honors him. The disciples continue to argue with Jesus when he tells them he is to die. But our heroine helps to prepare him for his ordeal and physical death. Remember, this is not the story of the woman who anointed his weary feet and wiped them with her hair. But the devotion and love shown here are equally as moving. She anoints his head, as befitted the as-yet unrecognized King of Israel. Just as the prophet Samuel anointed both Saul and then David to recognize God's chosen, so this woman pours perfumed oil on the head of the carpenter from Nazareth. Jesus himself points out that "She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial." It is the only burial anointing he will receive. When he is laid in the tomb on Friday, there is no time before the sundown beginning of Sabbath and when the women hurry to the tomb on Sunday morning, his body is gone. He has risen.

Ultimately, however, the strange, wild lesson of this story is not about duty to the poor or overthrowing the patriarchy or the failure then and now of those who hold religious power or of those who continue to misunderstand Jesus. Imagine, if you will, the scene as it happened, as Peter, if tradition is correct, must have described it to Mark. The week has been one of momentous happenings and high tension. Jesus had arrived in Jerusalem almost at the head of a parade, welcomed by the tumultuous enthusiasm of the common folk, who chant and wave branches and lay down their cloaks in his path. He has clashed with the authorities in the Temple, physically running the money-changers and sellers of doves out of the Court of the Gentiles. The religious authorities have sent representatives to question him publicly again and again, seeking to discredit him, to trip him up, to make him look bad. And he knows, he must know through rumor and whispers and common sense if not by supernatural knowledge, that he has been marked for death. Each night he withdraws from Jerusalem to Bethany so that he will not be vulnerable to a night attack when the crowds are not there to protect him from his enemies.

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He must have been exhausted. He and his disciples would have walked the mile and a half back to Bethany after each long, hot day. After a day of wrangling with his opponents, teaching his followers, healing those brought to him, Jesus must have felt nearly depleted. They would have hurriedly washed hands and feet before dinner but how long had it been since he'd soaked in the *mikvah*, the ritual bath, or dipped into the fresh waters of the Sea of Galilee near his home of Nazareth and his base at Capernaum? How long had it been since he'd had time to wash his clothes or someone to do it for him as his mother had done? How long had it been since anyone had simply been kind to him, to Jesus the Carpenter, rather than seeking favor from Jesus "who might be the Messiah?" And then, the heady smell of the spikenard, precious perfume distilled from a plant of the Himalayas. The warm drip of the anointing oil over his hair and on to his tired shoulders and weary face. The comforting touch of someone who was caring for him as he'd touched so many others to take away their sickness, their pain, even their death.

It was an extravagant, loving gesture. Three hundred denarii was roughly equivalent to a year's pay for a laborer in that time and place. If you wish, you might think of it in terms of the median annual income in Seattle in 2017, reported yesterday to have reached a staggering \$121,000. Yes, it could have fed and clothed a great number of those in need. And to break into that sealed container was irreversible. Once the narrow neck was snapped, the perfume had to be poured out or begin to spoil. The perfume was an all or nothing affair. The woman for whom it undoubtedly represented an entire life's savings was committed to giving all she had to Jesus once she began.

"Let her alone," Jesus told her critics; "why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me." Alan Culpepper writes, "The command is sharper in Greek, "Leave her!" or "Release her!" and the terms translated "a good service" literally mean "a beautiful work" or "a beautiful thing," and it may have carried the technical meaning of an act of charity." Dr. Culpepper may be thinking here of Jesus' potential use of the Hebrew term *mitzvah*. We often think of this word in its meaning of "a good deed" or "an act of charity" but it is also the term used for the commandments of the Old Testament and its use as "a good deed" is connected back to "the" *mitzvah*: You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself. Whether the unnamed woman saw her anointing of Jesus as an anointing of him as king or as preparing him for burial, we cannot know but I suspect that she did indeed understand it as an act of love. It was certainly, as Jesus said, a beautiful thing.

In this way, it goes beyond any rote charitable behavior or any good thing that we may do out of a sense of duty. This anonymous saint *saw* Jesus, *saw* how he seemed to feel, what he seemed to need, and acted out of love for her teacher and friend. In this story, there is none of the scandalous intimacy of Luke's fallen woman who dried Jesus' feet with her hair, although John's version of this story does include Mary using her hair in this way. But there is none the less an act of incredible intimacy here. To do what Jesus called "a beautiful thing" for him, our heroine must have known Jesus well-enough or been perceptive enough to intuit exactly what he needed to soothe his body and feed his soul that night.

I think it's OK for us to act out of duty, even nearly automatically, to give to the poor in our land. Indeed, it's more than OK; it's a commandment and a calling from God. But we must also look for those special times when only our intimate knowledge of a situation or a person and our action on it can truly make a difference. It's great to send a loved one a birthday card or give them cash at

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Christmas. But doesn't it feel even better to receive a note that we know was written just for us? Or to get a bunch of flowers from a friend who's just happened to notice we seem to be feeling down? Or that Christmas present that we've quietly been admiring in the shop window for months? When our giving includes not only the modern financial version of casting our bread upon the waters but also those intimate acts of giving to our friends and loved ones what it is that they are actually hoping for but dare not ask, then we are giving in a way that is most like our Loving Creator, who not only sends the rain upon the just and the unjust but knows us all even to the number of hairs on our heads.

And just as we should be aware of opportunities to do those beautiful things, we should be aware of them and grateful for them when they come to us. Please note, Jesus doesn't say to this dear one, "Oh, you shouldn't have" or "I really didn't need or don't deserve this" or "Oh, others are in more need than me." No, he said, "She has done a beautiful thing. She should always be remembered for this." This is my cue to say "Thank you" again, to you, my sisters and brothers, my friends. Yes, I know it's in my contract but you saw my exhaustion and my need and you said, "Go. Be away from us for three months and come back rested and healthy." I am so grateful for that. I can't tell you how many of my colleagues don't receive that kind of care from their congregations. I am grateful for your care for me. You have done a beautiful thing.

So give with your hearts, my friends, and receive in the same way. Take care of each other and take care of yourselves. In the midst of doing your duty for God and country, as you stand for justice and mercy for others, take time to be merciful and just to yourselves. Make room for play, for recreation. Take time to love yourself as well as those around you. Invest some of your busy time in joy; it will pay dividends. When the Holy Spirit whispers in your ear that *now* is the time and *this* is the beautiful thing, heed her stirrings in your heart. Be extravagant in your love and wild in your giving for we are made in the image of a Loving Creator who is extravagant and wild and altogether surprising in goodness, in generosity, and in love. For the woman with the perfume and the presence of her spirit in our memories and in our hearts and in our actions, thanks be to God.