

“Ointment and Anointing”

Mark 14:1-11

March 18, 2007

We draw closer and closer to Jesus’ fulfillment of the predictions he has made. Our text this morning comes later in the week, after Palm Sunday, after the confrontations with the Temple authorities, and after Jesus’ pronouncement of judgment on Jerusalem. Jesus has left the Temple area and has returned to Bethany, about three miles east where had had been staying during the week.

In Chapter 14, Mark begins the Passion narrative.

Listen: Mark 14:1-11

Look how Mark structures this passage. First, he sets the scene: the time is the days preceding the Passover, the remembrance of God’s deliverance of his people from bondage and slavery. The Passover is when God does something truly unexpected: in the weakness and powerlessness of his people, he demonstrates his sovereign authority and plan for salvation. Mark sets this scene in order to frame up what is about to happen with Jesus.

As we also have mentioned, during the Passover celebration and remembrance, Jerusalem became crowded with tourists and pilgrims; the city grew from a normal population of about 50,000 to about 250,000 people. You only need think of the news reports of crowds in the Middle East to understand how crowds generate energy, they cause movement, riots are always a possibility.

Second, Mark talks about the opposition to Jesus. The chief priests and the scribes want to arrest him secretly. Jesus was from Galilee; there would be a large contingent of people in Jerusalem from Galilee. Arresting and killing a popular, populist preacher from Galilee would very likely incite a riot that would be problematic. However, Jesus continual condemnation of the Temple was bound to raise the tension and a riot was a possibility if they did *not* arrest him.

Then Mark shifts the scene. Jesus is in Bethany reclining, and enjoying a meal. The disciples, on the other hand, are pretty stressed and on edge because of Jesus’ activity in Jerusalem. They have been watching and know that things are moving to some sort of confrontation.

So, while they are at dinner – Simon the Leper must have been someone known in the Roman church community for whom Mark was writing because Mark just drops the name; we, on the other hand, no nothing about him except he lived in an area generally designated for those who had leprosy and it was highly unlikely that Simon was still a leper at the time of this dinner – while they were at dinner, the disciples are somewhat tense. You can tell this because of the scale of their reaction to the woman anointing Jesus with oil. Anointing a guest at dinner with oil was not altogether an uncommon custom; it was a sign of affection and a sign of respect.

The disciples' objection seems to be in the grandeur of the act; if she had merely taken a portion and anointed him, they may not have said anything. She did not do that. She broke the jar and used all the oil. If she had not broken the jar, then the remainder could have been sold.

Ointment of the kind used by the woman was often a family heirloom, passed on from mother to daughter. The kind of ointment she used was "costly." She poured the whole thing out generously onto his head. This was an act of incredible devotion.

The disciples wonder because the Passover celebration had not yet come, and one of the elements of the Passover tradition was to give to charities for the poor – in other words, a tithe to the Temple, a tenth of the Temple offering in addition to go to the poor in Jerusalem. Based on Jesus' response, it seems the disciples may have been thinking that the money would help eliminate poverty in the new kingdom of God.

Jesus defends the woman against the rebuke of the disciples. It is interesting to note that Mark does not describe her purpose in anointing Jesus' head. In defending her, Jesus gives a meaning to her act that she may or may not have considered. Specifically, he tells the disciples that she has anointed his body beforehand for burial. That had to be a bit of a show-stopper. There is Jesus, very much alive, talking about how he was being anointed ahead of time for his impending death.

The scene then shifts back. Judas Isacriot, one of the twelve, goes to the chief priests in order to betray Jesus. Again, look how Mark describes what is happening here: the religious authorities plot to kill Jesus, a woman treats him with adoration and respect only to draw the anger of Jesus' closest friends and followers; then one of the twelve leaves to betray him. Plots to kill him provide bookends to the disciples' continuing to missing what is happening. While the authorities plan how to kill him, while the disciples try to figure out how to be administrators in the kingdom of God, she simply loves Jesus.

Don't begrudge other Christians their devotion to Christ.

When the disciples grumble about the woman anointing his head, Jesus asks them, "Why are you troubling her?" In other words, he is asking them, "You are worried about this?" He has been predicting his own death, they have been with him through a series of increasingly hostile confrontations, and the authorities are plotting against him. He has just finished the Olivet Discourse in which he has told the disciples of the persecution they would face "because of his name." Then, just a short time later, the disciples gripe about a woman doing something *nice for* Jesus?

It is amazing to think of how we still do this. Christians are notoriously harsh on other Christians. We spend a lot of time and energy criticizing one another. This is true within congregation and it is true among congregations. We often act like we are American Idol judges with a responsibility to weigh in on someone else's worship performance: it is too enthusiastic, it is not enthusiastic enough. That church demands too much, it does not demand enough. They sing strange songs. They do strange things. They do not do anything much at all.

I am not point the finger at anyone without pointing at myself. I get things in the mail from Eastlake Community and some of the other congregations and my first response tends to be, “Oh, look at that. How crass,” or some other critical thing. I am not proud of that, by the way; I am confessing it to you. Instead of rejoicing at another congregation’s efforts to reach the lost, I sit in judgment about what they are doing. There is something competitive in our natures that cause us to be critical of how others are either doing things better than we are, or to feel better about ourselves because we think we are doing better than they are.

The church has grappled with the temptation to criticize and compete with each other from the very early times. The disciples obviously were a competitive bunch. Remember earlier in Mark how James and John asked Jesus to sit on his right and left when he came into glory? That did not sit well with the others. Later, in the book of Corinthians, Paul has to chastise believers for claiming priority allegiance to Peter, to Apollos, or to Paul himself. Paul’s question, “Is Christ divided?”

Instead of loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, we spend time comparing ourselves with others to see how well we are loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. Oops.

The woman simply acts in loving devotion to Jesus. Her way, her thing, her act of worship. And Jesus receives it as worship. His response about the poor was not to denigrate the poor; his response about the poor shows how much Jesus values her love for him.

In essence, Jesus is telling the disciples, “She is not the enemy. She is not the problem. She is not opposed to me, so do not be opposed to her.” Actually, Jesus’ rebuke of the disciples is both a warning to us and also a great word of encouragement. Jesus will stand up for those who love him. Jesus honors those who love him. “Wherever the gospel is proclaimed, what she has done will be told” – and so it is.

Loving God often does not make sense to the world.

The woman’s act of devotion to Jesus did not make sense to the disciples. That is ok. Many times loving God calls us to do things that do not make sense in human terms.

When I was serving Westminster in Escondido, I knew (and still know) a woman who lived this kind of love. She was a life-long citizen of California. She and her husband were both raised in San Diego County. They met here, they married here, they raised their family here.

God began a mighty work in her after her sons had moved out of the family home. She began to get more and more involved in a prayer ministry within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) known as Presbyterians Reformed Ministries, International. Through her interest and walk with God, she began to lead several prayer teams at Westminster.

Then, God called her to move to North Carolina. She prayed about it and they prayed about it but could not shake it.

As an act of devotion to God, she moved away from her aging parents, all the people she had known. Imagine it: the call to move was reminiscent of God's call to Abram, to up and leave everything he knew for a land God had promised.

That's what she did. She moved. It has been an adventure: not everything has gone smoothly, nor has it been easy. Yet they are convinced that they are being faithful to God and have experienced joys and spiritual blessings that she finds difficult to describe in words. They have lost money, they will never be able to move back to California, they have had to learn a different community and a different culture. All of that does not matter – or at least not nearly as much as the joy living and growing in their love for God. He is their strength and refuge, their help in times of trouble, the source and provider of all their needs.

All of which is to say that the adventure of faith is ongoing, no matter what is your age or situation. God can and does call us – you and me – to do things that do not make sense. For some, it is a wake-up call in the middle of the night to pray, without knowing for whom or why. For others, it is the desire to go somewhere in mission. Still others are given a word of encouragement to share with someone they barely know. And so on...

Faith is the willingness to do what God asks without having the benefit of seeing the whole plan. Faith is the willingness to trust God and to do acts that do not seem to make sense. If you are called to do something for the glory of God and to proclaim the gospel, it is likely that God is inviting you to participate in an adventure that will bless you in ways that you cannot imagine.

God blesses our obedience

God blesses our obedience because he uses it for his plan of salvation. The woman thought she was making a grand, loving act towards Jesus; and she was. Jesus says that she was preparing his body ahead of time for burial (again predicting his passion); and it was that, too. And, on top of those things, Mark points out that she was anointing Jesus to be king.

God blesses and uses our obedience in ways that we cannot imagine before he reveals his purpose.

In the Old Testament, there are a number of times when a prophet or priest is sent out to anoint a king. The most widely remembered is Samuel being sent to Jesse to anoint one of his sons; Samuel looked over a number of them until they brought in the ruddy one who was out in the fields as a shepherd: that one, David, Samuel anointed as king.

Here, in the presence of his closest followers, the woman's anointment with this precious nard serves to bless Jesus' mission to be the Messiah. The coronation of his kingship will be on the cross. The title "King of the Jews" will be nailed above his head. His crown will be made of thorns, fashioned by the Roman soldiers who will beat him. His royal robe will be torn and lots will be cast for it. Jesus' love does not make sense to the world, but it is blessed by God as he manifests his plan for salvation.

When we love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, when we express that love in worship or acts of praise, God blesses that obedience. Jesus uses her act of love to again predict his victory over death; her act of love will be told wherever the gospel is told – the good news of Jesus’ atoning death on the cross and resurrection from the dead.

Think about it: we are remembering her act as we proclaim the gospel this morning. Was that her purpose? No. She was simply loving Jesus. Was that God’s purpose? Yes.

God’s plans are bigger and more wonderful than we can imagine. “Faith,” says the writer of Hebrews, “is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen.” Paul writes in Romans, “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ...For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.”

On whom or what would you break the jar and pour out your most precious ointment?

Remember the greatest command: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself. Christ honors those who love him.

“Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. ...Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

Amen.

8:45 prayer and offering

10:00 offering