

Isaiah 61:1-3 ~ Mark 14:3-9

Table Talk: What is She Doing?

Entering the Passion of Jesus: To Jerusalem and Beyond (4th of 5 Sermon Series)

April 7, 2019 ~ 5th Sunday in Lent

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to Scripture:

Today in this sermon series we've made it to **Wednesday** of Jesus' Passion week, or Holy Week, the last week of Jesus' life on earth. On this Wednesday Jesus is given a gift that shocked and offended all who were present. In Mark's telling of this story, we don't know who among his disciples were there. But we are told immediately after this incident, "Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them.

Those of you who have been walking through this sermon series on Jesus' Passion will remember that we started with **Sunday**, Jesus entry into Jerusalem, humble and riding on a donkey; observed him **Monday** in the Temple and turning over the tables, causing a ruckus in righteous anger. Then on **Tuesday**, last week's sermon, he was again in the Temple for a long day of teaching that delighted the crowd and silenced the Temple authorities. That day in the Temple ended with Jesus and the poor widow and her "all-in" gift of two small copper coins. So now it's **Wednesday**, Jesus has left the Temple for the last time and we find him in a private setting---at table. It's a table in Bethany, and that table belongs to Simon. Not Simon Peter or Simon the Pharisee, but Simon the leper. That's right Jesus is eating with Simon the leper, who because of his leprosy would have been considered an unclean outcast. And it's just two days before the highest holy days of Passover. Tension is mounting. We are told in the verse just prior to this story, "the chief priests and scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him." (Mark 14:1). And then this happens. We begin at verse 3.

Sermon

"'Evangelism' is a scary word even to many Christians", writes Kathleen Norris, in her book *Amazing Grace*. "I have often heard people who are dedicated members of a church say, "I hate evangelism" or "I don't believe in it," or usually from the shy, more introverted members of a congregation, "I'll do anything else for this church, but don't ask me to serve on the evangelism committee."¹ Don't worry: Here at FPC, we don't even *have* an Evangelism Committee. We have an excellent Membership committee, and an excellent Outreach committee. Both committees are doing amazing work. But do not have an Evangelism Committee. Too scary, perhaps. Maybe if we called it "The Anointing Woman" Committee it might have a chance of flying here.

That scary word, "Evangelism" comes from the Greek "*euangelos*," meaning a messenger (or angel) who brings good news. That's also the Greek word we translate as "Gospel." Mark delivers for us today the story of an unnamed woman, who on the Wednesday of Jesus' Passion week, does something shocking and offensive to everyone at the table, except Jesus. Jesus calls it beautiful or good. He was so moved by her "good service" that he says, Wherever the good news or *euangelion* is spread in the whole world the story of what she had done should be told. It is told in all four gospels. Do we love to tell her story?

Her name has been lost. Neither Mark (the earliest gospel to be written) nor Matthew give her a name when they tell her story. Luke doesn't name her, instead he gives her a label, calling her a "sinner" leaving it up to us to fill in the blank (what kind of sin, that most surmise, *that* kind). John's telling of this story comes along later and identifies the woman as Mary of Bethany. The Mary who was the sister of

Martha and Lazarus. And so, truth be told the rock-solid identity of this woman has been lost. We will never know for sure. But what she *did* was told and retold. Back then, anyway.

Perhaps the “beautiful service” she performed was told and retold there at the start because it involved more than a whiff of scandal: an unknown, unrelated, uninvited woman barging into the house of Simon the Leper, walking right up to Jesus, then touching the Rabbi and without hesitation or asking permission began anointing his head, so tenderly. So lavishly. Can that be nard? Talk about over the top. Add to the scandal a strong scent of controversy: too much money, too lavishly spent and all for nard? That’s the special ointment used by lovers and for burial. Who does she think she is? Where is her sense of decorum and decency? Has she listened to *anything* the Teacher has said? So, embarrassing for her, really. And can you believe her timing? Two days before the high holy days? That unmistakable smell will surely be in his hair when the Passover lamb is sacrificed and he is sitting at the Passover table. He couldn’t possibly wash out that strong perfume in time. How embarrassing for him, too.

Can we still smell it? Jesus hopes we do. Her name has been lost. Her love has not. Her *tender, generous, timely, gutsy*, sacrament of love made flesh. Yes, sacrament (small “s” sacrament): A physical in which something we can touch, taste, or smell, mediates the presence of divine Love and Grace. Her sacrament of love made flesh was not mediated through taste, (like the Sacrament of Holy Communion with bread and wine) but rather through *smell*. Truly, the essence of sacrament permeates Mark’s telling of what she did. Take a second at the text and note the words that echo what Jesus will do with the disciples in two days’ time. “As he sat **at the table**, ...and she **broke** open the jar... and **poured** the ointment,” ... “what she has done will be told **in remembrance of her**.” “While he was at table with the disciples, he took the bread and broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘do this in remembrance of me’ (See Luke 22:14-19).

She broke through to reach out to Jesus in love, believing him to be the Christ. She also suffered shame and mocking, as Jesus would in two days. Misunderstood, underestimated, not even named. How did those at the table get it so wrong about the anointing woman? Jesus abruptly reframed what she had done by anointing his head and body with nard. For him, it was not embarrassing, or over the top, it was beautiful. What she did was right as rain. And just in time. Once again (not unlike the poor widow in the Temple) the outsider, the misfit, turned out to be *the one* person in the room who took appropriate action with her *tender, generous, timely, gutsy*, sacrament of love made flesh.

The uninvited outsider came in and became the extreme insider. If you think about it, was she not the **first** evangelist for Christ in Mark? The anointing woman was the first one who believed Jesus when he kept telling everyone that he would be killed and in three days be raised from the dead.ⁱⁱ Her sense of timing, exquisite: If not now, when? If not her, then who? She seemed to know this would be anyone’s last chance to anoint his head, to physically proclaim Jesus as King, and in the same gesture anoint his body for burial. Mary Magdalene, Mary the Mother of James, and Salome brought spices on the third day to anoint what they expected would be his 3-days dead body. Apparently, they did not yet believe his words about rising either. But the anointing woman did. She was the first evangelist and she never said a word. Yet the reverberations of her anointing were to be told around the world. So Jesus said.

What can we learn from the first evangelist for Christ? She was also the last human from whom he would feel a loving touch before he was arrested and deserted by his friends, mocked by his enemies. We can learn from her willingness to risk rejection in the name of a tender, extravagant gift of love. We are told that is cost the equivalent of a year’s earnings. The others at the table were quick to judge and

fault her: they seized on what they thought would be a winning argument of Jesus who cares deeply for the poor. And they were shocked at his response. I wonder if maybe, just maybe, anointing Jesus with costly nard *was* giving to the poor, only in reverse: she was modeling Jesus' teaching that when we assuage the hurt of the hungry, thirsty, stranger, sick, or imprisoned we are doing it to Jesus.

I want to tell you about another woman, cut from the same cloth as the anointing woman who lived closer to our time, who was born into slavery in New York, around 1797 with the name Isabella Baumfree. As Jan Richardson, artist, writer and pastor has written, "She had ten or twelve brothers and sisters whom she only knew from stories told by her mother, "Mau-mau Bett"; their master had sold all the children except for Isabella and her younger brother, Pater. In 1828, after being sold and later escaping, Isabella gained her freedom and moved to NYC. After living there for more than a decade, Isabella experienced a call from the Spirit to travel and lecture. She desired a new name that would reflect her new vocation. "And the Lord gave me Sojourner, because I was to travel up an' down the land, showin' the people their sins, an being a sign unto them. Afterward I told the Lord I wanted another name, 'cause everybody else had two names; and the Lord gave me Truth because I was to declare truth to the people.' Sojourner Truth became a fiery preacher, orator, and abolitionist."

"One day, while preparing a speech at the town-house in Angola, Indiana, she heard of a threat that the building would be burned down if she spoke there. "Then I will speak upon the ashes," Sojourner replied. Amid the threat of destruction, she made a promise of proclamation. *I will speak upon the ashes.*ⁱⁱⁱ With her words, Sojourner Truth gives an image of the work not only of a preacher but I would say of all Christ followers—to do what they can even—and especially—amid barrenness, destruction, injustice, and pain. There she was, risking rejection to share the good news, the euangelos of Jesus grace and love for everyone.

Here's the thing, "God desires us to give lavishly, generously, wantonly from the depths of who we are and who God has created us to be. Such extravagant acts can seem wasteful. By Jesus response to the anointing woman, however, he proclaims that such gestures of grace bring healing to the body of Christ and to the whole world."^{iv} Our whole world needs healing. Yes, this world that Jesus came to save. And each of us needs healing, of one kind or another. I believe Jesus calls us all to be wounded healers. Do you remember the day you heard "cancer" and "you have" in the same sentence? Whatever was said after that you probably didn't hear. And surely you wondered, "who's with me?" As the modern British mystic, Evelyn Underhill has written, "There's always a night shift, and sooner or later everyone gets put on it." All of us have had—will have long days and longer nights when we wonder "who's with me." I believe Jesus did too. And God gave Jesus the answer that Jesus needed on the Wednesday from the soothing, tender touch of the nard on his head and skin, by the anointing woman. Perhaps that lingering scent, the thought of her extravagant anointing helped him on that Friday as he hung on the cross, when the whole world turned dark.

No, we don't have an "Evangelism Committee" at FPC as such. But I think we *do* have an "Anointing Woman Committee" here. And everybody's on it.

ⁱ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, (Riverhead Books, New York: NY, 1998), 300.

ⁱⁱ Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem*, (HarperSanFrancisco: San Francisco, CA, 2006), 104.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jan L. Richardson, *In the Sanctuary of Women: A Companion for Reflection & Prayer*, (Upper Room Books: Nashville:TN, 2010), 233-234.

^{iv} *Ibid*, 232.