

Today is the first Sunday in the season of Lent. Lent is the forty days we journey with Jesus to the cross. During this season, we're going to look at some lesser known characters in the Bible. These characters are found in the stories of the last days of Jesus's life, known as the Passion. One scholar writes that "the Passion is the story of Jesus with the echoes of many others, and while I stand in awe of the One who laid down his life for me, I stand in sympathy with those around him, because in their stories I so readily see my own" (Eric Kolbell). This sermon series is called "Were you there? Finding Ourselves at the Foot of the Cross (Kolbell)." Today's story involves **the unnamed woman who anointed Jesus in preparation for his burial**. All four Gospels offer a story of Jesus being anointed with perfume by a woman. As it is with any story told in different versions, we often get the details mixed up and combine them into one story. However, each account has distinctive features and should be examined on its own terms. For example, in Luke, unlike in the other three gospels, the story takes place at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. But in Mark's version of this story, the story takes place two days before Passover- right before Jesus is crucified. And in John's version, he identifies the anointing woman as Mary, Martha and Lazarus' sister, but in the other three Gospels she is unnamed. Let us listen to Mark's account of the woman anointer. Before turning to God's Word, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.** Mark 14:3-9.

Can't you just see Jesus and his disciples gathered around the table for a meal at Simon the Leper's house? Can you imagine sitting around the table when without warning an unnamed- probably unknown- woman enters the room carrying an alabaster vase and heads straight towards Jesus? She breaks open the vase and

pours the contents on Jesus' head (v. 3). Let's pause here for a moment to recognize that the image of Jesus being anointed that remains most common among Christians is Luke's version of a woman sinner from the city weeping at Jesus' feet, wiping up her tears with her long hair (8:37-38). But that isn't THIS woman. In Mark, we find another unnamed woman who enters into Simon the Leper's house, unexpected and uninvited, and "stands over Jesus, pouring costly ointment on his head. Kings were anointed in Israel with the pouring of oil over the head, always the task of a male leader or prophet specially chosen. This makes one think of the 23rd Psalm (5b)- when King David writes that the Lord "anointed my head with oil, my cup runneth over." This woman acted boldly, radically, and prophetically" (Joyce Hollyday, *Clothed With the Sun*). One would think that it wouldn't be a big deal for someone to take these kind of risks in a leper or healed leper's home. In other words, one may think that a leper knows what it's like to be judged or shamed and would therefore welcome this woman. Simon didn't welcome her, but Jesus did. Who was this woman? Did she come from a wealthy family or was the jar of perfume all she had to her name? We aren't told much about her at all. I imagine that you could have heard a pin drop after what this woman did. However, the silence was most likely interrupted by some angry people talking about her with her still in the room saying to each other, "Why waste the perfume? This perfume could have been sold for almost a year's pay and the money given to the poor" (vv. 4-5). They scolded her. They judged her. They shamed her. And some of us may find their actions concerning this fleeting display of devotion appropriate. I must confess that their criticism gives me pause. Shouldn't we be sensible? Sparingly? Cautious? There are so many in need among us. Shouldn't we weigh the options and consider the costs? The

short answer is no, not always. “Not at the expense of the life-giving and the beautiful” (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net).

Where have you seen extravagance and judged it as wasteful- especially extravagant things that don't last? Or when have you been made to feel uneasy or uncomfortable by someone's extravagance? “Is this woman's gift lavish? Yes. Is it 'useless' to the practically-minded? Yes. Is it efficient, orderly, or logical? No. And yet Jesus cherishes and blesses it” (Thomas). For Jesus, the One walking this lonesome journey, the beauty in her gesture was not a waste. He defends this unnamed woman in front of her critics. “Leave her alone,” he says. “Why do you make trouble for her? She has done a good thing for me” (v.6). Another translation reads, “She has done a beautiful thing for me” (RSV). Jesus was “reminding them that there are moments in life when love in all its illogical glory breaks in upon us in such a way that we can only stand in awe of it, feel its beauty, and allow it to overwhelm us” (Kolbell). Jesus tells them, “You always have the poor with you; and whenever you want, you can do something good for them. But you won't always have me” (v. 7). What did Jesus mean by this? This is another sign of Jesus' impending death, and this woman seems to be the only one in the room to recognize Jesus' limited time remaining on earth. The others had yet to grasp that salvation was going to come by way of a cross, yet this woman seemed to understand. Anointing wasn't just for kings, it was also a common practice for burial. “Wrenched to the heart by the suffering that lay just ahead, she performed an act of loving-kindness. She was a prophet, announcing a death, preparing a body for burial. She was telling all the world that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, the 'Anointed One'” (Hollyday).

And what about the always having the poor part? What does that mean? Some people over the years have misunderstood Jesus' response. Jesus wasn't saying not to care for or serve the poor. No. "Jesus, like his fellow Jews, would of course have expected people to help support the poor. But in this case, there is the need- in this moment- to support him" (*Entering The Passion of Jesus*, AJ Levine, p. 102). Here Jesus seems to be quoting from Deuteronomy 15:11, which states that there will never cease to be some in need on the earth. But for this moment...for now...this unnamed woman in her extravagant act is caring for Jesus in his time of need. She responds to the call of love in the moment. In the now. She acts. Sometimes we miss the moment- the now- when we're caught up in calculating the costs, judging and/or being prudent. And sometimes we, like this woman, give our resources, in generosity, even if they may seem wasteful. You can have moments of extravagant adoration while also being responsible to the poor as both constitute the work of love. Can you think of times when gifts of extravagance that don't last were selfless acts for what was happening at that moment? What about sending flowers to someone in the hospital or granting a wish by sending a terminally ill child on the trip of his dreams? That could be seen as a waste. **What this woman brings into this gathering is beauty: an incredibly selfless act of vulnerable love.** In the moments immediately after his anointing, "Jesus insists that beauty matters: that [sometimes] the aesthetic can take precedence over the moral. Think about it this way: in times of peril, pain, or trouble in your own life, what has comforted you the most? What has carried you through? The platitudes of a pragmatist? Or the lavish and 'useless' gestures of someone who loves you" (Thomas)?

We forget that Jesus is fully human, just as he is fully divine. He has needs and feelings and walked the journey of faith just as you and I do. I wonder how he felt to be anointed with costly perfume by this woman? There seems to be no guilt attached for Jesus. It's more like gratitude for this rare act of extravagant love was most likely a much needed "balm to Jesus' soul and heart. His loneliest hour was quickly approaching, his closest friends were turning away in confusion, his agonizing death was in view, and an unknown woman let him know that she understood, that he was not alone" (Hollyday). I imagine he also felt extremely loved, but we aren't told. Perhaps he needed to feel that extravagant love in order to endure what was coming- but we aren't told that either. However, we are told that Jesus blesses her act and rebukes the criticism of her act. She recognizes the rarity of the moment, and she seizes it. This woman empties herself for the One who emptied himself- even to death on a cross. She chooses to risk pouring out not only the expensive perfume- but also her love- for this beautiful gift of a moment- for this encounter with Jesus- now- not save it for a rainy day. "Without using words, this woman leaves nothing unsaid in the face of Jesus' impending death. She spills her perfume with wild abandon for no other reason than this: Jesus is there. There is no calculation here, no consideration for efficiency, no sense that this is a waste. No- there is nothing but sheer love and gratitude for who Jesus is and what he has done" (*The Christian Century*, Justo Gonzalez, March 13, 2019).

Jesus says this woman "has done what she could. She has anointed my body ahead of time for burial" (v.8). She has done what she could, and it was enough. It was a gift. She couldn't save Jesus from the shadows of the cross, but she gave

all she had in the name of utter love and devotion. “She is a standing rebuke to all who believe that faithfulness means joylessness, that justice and beauty must be rivals” (Hollyday). Jesus reiterates that this unnamed woman’s beautiful gesture is worthy of honor and remembrance. He gives this woman, along with those gathered around Simon’s table and each of us “permission to savor the good gifts of life on this fragile but gorgeous earth-the pleasures of our senses, the beauties of nature, and the fruits of human creativity and artistry” (Thomas). **This woman risks a lot- doing all she could- for such a simple- yet profound- gesture of love, and Jesus recognizes what a beautiful thing she has done for him.** What risks are you willing to pour out love? How have you done what you could for love? Love poured out...is a beautiful and vulnerable and holy thing. This Lent may we do what we can for those in the world God asks us to love and honor, whatever the risks or criticism; it will be beautiful. And “may God give us grace to never sell ourselves short; grace to risk something big for something good; grace to remember that the world is too dangerous for anything but truth and too small for anything but love” (William Sloane Coffin). Amen.