

An Invitation to Weep

When Jesus and his followers approached Jerusalem, they came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives. Jesus gave two disciples a task, saying to them, "Go into the village over there. As soon as you enter it, you will find tied up there a colt that no one has ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'Its master needs it, and he will send it back right away.'"

They went and found a colt tied to a gate outside on the street, and they untied it. Some people standing around said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" They told them just what Jesus said, and they left them alone. They brought the colt to Jesus and threw their clothes upon it, and he sat on it. Many people spread out their clothes on the road while others spread branches cut from the fields. Those in front of him and those following were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessings on the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest!" Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple. After he looked around at everything, because it was already late in the evening, he returned to Bethany with the Twelve.

Mk. 11:1-11 (C.E.B.)

For the children:

Do you like to watch parades?
Have you ever been in a parade?

What's your favorite part of a parade?

Did you know that Jesus was in a parade once? People were so excited they took palm branches and waved them in the air. Some people threw the palm branches on the ground so Jesus could walk on them!

Do you want to see what that sounded like? Let's try it. (*I'll lead them as we walk across the palm branches that have been strewn across the chancel.*)

Pretty cool, huh? Did you hear the branches go crunch, crunch, crunch?

It was like the branches were joining the crowds as they cheered for Jesus.

Let's pray:

God, if you can make branches cheer for you, we know we can celebrate, too. Thank you for coming to us. Amen.

Jesus was at Bethany visiting the house of Simon, who had a skin disease. During dinner, a woman came in with a vase made of alabaster and containing very expensive perfume of pure nard. She broke open the vase and poured the perfume on his head. Some grew angry. They said 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." And they scolded her.

Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Why do you make trouble for her? She has done a good thing for me. 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. She

has done what she could. She has anointed my body ahead of time for burial. I tell you the truth that, wherever in the whole world the good news is announced, what she's done will also be told in memory of her."

Mk. 14:3-9 (C.E.B.)

For the adults:

There are several things worth noting about our text this morning, not the least of which is that this story is recounted, with slight variation, in each of the four gospels (Mt. 26:6-13; Mk. 14:3-9; Lk. 7:36-50; Jn. 12:1-8).

Assuming the four gospel writers are retelling the same story, there are some interesting conflicting details. Only John gives us her name, for example (Jn. 12:3). One Gospel writer says it took place at the house of a Pharisee (Lk. 7:36). Another tells us it was at the house of Lazarus (Jn. 12:1). Two tell us it was at the house of a Leper named Simon – presumably a “former” leper, although that is never stated (Mt. 26:6; Mk. 14:3). Two of the Gospel writers say the perfume was poured on his head (Mt. 26:7; Mk. 14:3). Two say it was on his feet (Lk. 7:38; Jn. 12:3) One says she wiped his feet with her tears (Lk. 7:38). Another says she wiped his feet with her hair (Jn. 12:3).

Let me be clear. I am not challenging the sacredness of this story. Nor am I implying it never happened. I simply believe each writer tells it from a different perspective and highlights different parts of the story, maybe taking some literary license to make their point. Because of the conflicting details, it's tempting to gloss over them and try to make a composite picture – which may unintentionally happen to any of us – as we make the details we remember fit what we are hearing. In fact, I did that when I conceived of the title for today's sermon.

What I am asking you to do is to let me stick with the particulars of the way Mark tells the story, to set aside what you may remember from other variations of the story and to hear what unique things Mark wants us to hear.

Mark says Simon is the host (Mk. 14:3). It is implied that others have joined them at the meal, not just the disciples (Mk. 14:4).¹ Mark says this woman fulfills what was said about Jesus from the beginning of the Gospel – she anoints the “anointed one” (Mk. 1:1; 14:8).² Finally, he says this story will always be told in memory of this unnamed woman (Mk. 14:9).

I'm not sure which part of the story is told in her memory; although I think it gives us a clue about Mark's focus.

- Maybe it's her generosity.
- Maybe it's her audacity to anoint Jesus.
- Maybe it's her silent witness that points to his death.
- Maybe it's her willingness to give her most precious gift of perfume, not unlike a different unnamed woman who put her last two coins in the treasury box (Mk. 12:42).

According to Jason Porterfield's chronicle of holy week, the meal at Simon's house was on Wednesday.³ That means it is the day before Jesus celebrates Passover (Mk. 14:12). Presumably, Simon will be joining a Passover meal with his family, since it's typically a family event. Jesus will not be at that meal, however. He will celebrate the Passover with his disciples (Mk. 14:16).

¹ Compare with Matthew, for example, who says the disciples respond to her wastefulness.

² Geddert, p. 331

³ Porterfield, p. 98

And that makes me think of Shoshana. I met her while I was a seminary student. She was an adjunct professor who taught contemporary Hebrew at a community college where I worked part-time as a secretary. When she learned I was a seminary student, she took it upon herself to teach me Hebrew. I confess, she was a much better teacher than I was a student.

But we became friends. In fact, we've had several conversations in the past few weeks. Her husband died last fall, and they have no children. She always made room in her home for international students, though; and people like me. She treated us like family. It was no surprise, then – although I considered it a great honor – to be invited to celebrate Passover with them.

Sitting at her dining room table for the Seder meal comes to mind when I realize Simon will likely be preparing for Passover (Mk. 14:1).

You see, Shoshana explained to me that in the days leading up to Passover, the house is cleaned and swept. Any remnants of leavening agents would be removed before the Seder Supper would be cooked. Tables would be set. Menus would be planned. Food would be bought. The house was prepared for company.

As gracious as Shoshana is, it's hard for me to imagine her inviting someone to dinner the night before Passover. Maybe not even two nights before. Unless she was planning to recruit someone to help with Passover.

So, I wonder. Does Simon have an agenda? Has he invited Jesus here for a reason? Maybe Jesus was the one who healed him and he wants to thank Jesus.

Mark tells us Simon lives in Bethany, the place where Jesus began his triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Mk. 11:1). Maybe, like others, Simon thinks Jesus is going to overthrow Rome and he wants Jesus to know he will help in whatever way he can. Maybe he has invited others to the table who can each play a role in this coup.

But an unnamed woman enters the room and, without saying a word, she silences any conversations about a takeover of the government.

She brings with her a flask made of alabaster, a white stone that almost looks translucent. Inside is a precious oil, a perfume. Some scholars suggest it was common practice to keep a flask of precious oil as an insurance plan, an emergency source of funding. Hers might be worth \$25,000.

Maybe it would be like the tradition of wearing earrings I heard about this week. It says that Morgan Freeman wears an earring that if sold would provide just enough to buy a coffin, should he die in a strange place.

It's been a while since I went perfume shopping. I do remember that you can purchase most perfumes in several different forms, each a little more diluted. As currently marketed, extract is the most potent form, with 15 – 40% concentration. The more popular perfumes and colognes are less than 10% concentration.

The most expensive one I could find online is about \$4,000 for the amount in her alabaster flask. But hers is "pure" nard (Mk. 14:3). 100% concentration.

The only people who would need that level of concentration are manufacturers and wholesalers. I wonder if she is the local Avon Lady? Maybe her supply is intended for resale. If that is the case, her extravagant gift is really no different than when the disciples leave their fishing boats and nets. It's no different than when Matthew leaves his abacus at his tax office to follow Jesus.



In response to her extravagance, though, some of the guests complain about the waste (Mk. 14:4). They don't see a commitment to discipleship. Nor do they see an invitation to surrender what *they* have. Instead, they complain (Mk. 14:4-5). They suggest it should have been sold and given to the poor rather than poured out on the head of Jesus (Mk. 14:5).

Jesus gives two responses, well maybe three. First, he tells them to leave her alone (Mk. 14:6).

Then he reminds them that they always have the poor with them. They can give anytime they want (Mk. 14:7). When he says that, by the way, Jesus isn't just spouting off; he is quoting scripture. And I feel obligated to give the complete quotation, since I believe his audience knows how the passage ends:

Poor persons will never disappear from the earth. That's why I'm giving you this command: you must open your hand generously to your fellow Israelites, to the needy among you, and to the poor who live with you in your land.

Dt. 15:11

That always gives me pause, because they are not the only ones who forget – or intentionally ignore – the command to be generous. We *must* open our hand generously to the needy, it says. I don't know if the others in the room are that generous, but no one offers an excuse, either.

The other response Jesus gives to their complaints is aimed at their misunderstanding of his purpose. He knows he is going to die. He says she has prepared his body for his death, and that is a good thing (Mk. 14:8).

When we began our Lenten journey, we started from the point at which Jesus tells his disciples he is going to Jerusalem to die. He tells them that explicitly at least three times (Mk. 8:31; 9:31; 10:33). But there is no indication any of them believe him. They hear the words Jesus is saying, but they can't hear it.

Now they have gathered at the home of Simon, with Passover looming over them. And Jesus says this woman, likely an uninvited guest, an outsider at best, is the only one in the room who understands what is about to happen. She has eyes of faith that believe the story he is telling them. And because she believes the story, we cannot tell it without remembering her (Mk. 14:9).

She has anointed the anointed one. But she is not anointing him in the sense of a coming ruler who will overthrow Caesar. She is anointing him as he fulfills his purpose, his destiny. She is preparing him for his death and burial.

And she gives her all because she knows he will give his.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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www.WorkingPreacher.org

⁴ A Gospel parallel of today’s text.