

It is a privilege for me this morning to return to this pulpit and preach the Gospel, something I haven't done here for four consecutive Sundays. I am so grateful for those who shared with you from here in my absence. Earlier this week, I sat down and listened to all four sermons that happened while I was gone, and each one was insightful, inspiring, and engaging. It was remarkable! And I thought of how great a benefit it was for our congregation to get to hear from these four other preachers some of *their* story, some of their take on *God's* story, and how those two stories intersect. So meaningful! Telling our story, telling God's story, and bringing the two together is certainly one of the ways that God takes on flesh among us. In our Gospel lesson this morning, we have a story of a three-way intersection in the lives of an unnamed woman, Jesus, and the collective group gathered there in the home of Simon the leper. This woman's act of devotion to Jesus becomes her legacy to us, as our lesson ends—"wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her." And so it is. This morning, over 2000 years after this original event happened, around the world, in a dramatically different cultural context, we remember her—and we don't even know who she is! But we remember this unnamed woman; this loving, bold, generous woman becomes our focal point, just as the lesson indicates would happen.

I want to explore the rich intersections between the primary characters in this story, but I want to first say that I love this story. I love how this woman makes an over-the-top gesture for our Lord. I'm also *intimidated* by this story. Because I can't easily think of equivalent actions on my part, whether for God or other people. And I'm also a little *troubled* by this story, because it raises issues of generosity, frugality, and financial priorities that make us stop and think, and that can make our heads hurt. This story is not without controversy, as our text reveals; the woman's action was definitely disruptive and provoked negative reaction from some of those present.

Let's think why that might be. Jesus and his followers are sharing a meal together. Quite possibly, it's a primarily male gathering. There are likely tense undercurrents at play. Jesus has already entered Jerusalem,

overturned the money tables within the Temple, and generally upset a number of important people of the status quo who are feeling threatened by his popularity, his moral courage, and his message. He will, in fact, be executed by week's end. Which he knows and has been trying to tell his followers. They seem to be largely in denial of the peril that looms, yet they had to know they were all in a situation that put them at odds with powerful people within their own Jewish culture as well as with their Roman overlords. Perhaps they had gathered in hopes of finding a quiet, stress-free time of respite, and that time is rudely interrupted by the unexpected. A woman enters the house; we don't know if they know her or not. We don't know if she has had previous encounters with Jesus or not. We don't know her name. All we know is that she is independent enough in her thinking to break some social taboos, like entering this gathering of men and approaching one in particular with a highly unlikely agenda in mind; she intends to anoint him with costly perfumed nard from an elegant alabaster jar. Such an action would only be appropriate in the rare case of the anointing of a king or the anointing for burial of a very important person. Because this isn't just a dime store bottle of mineral oil; this is an extraordinarily valuable commodity.

Rarely are we given the kind of details about an item that we are given in this story, so we know the details matter. The jar is of alabaster, an expensive, white stone within the ancient world. The ointment of nard is very costly, in fact, according to those present, it was worth 300 hundred denarii, about the annual earnings of the typical peasant worker at that time. So, that jar of nard represents the average person's annual salary. Let's translate that into our time and place, using the fact that the MN state minimum wage is a bit over \$10 an hour. But keeping things simple, let's multiply \$10 an hour times 52 work weeks of 40 hours each, and you find yourself at \$20,800. So this woman has a jar of perfumed nard worth a bit over \$20,000. Good Lord! I'm willing to wager that no one here has ever spent \$20,000 on a bottle of perfume, no matter how exquisite. How does this woman even come to have such an extraordinary commodity?

The honest answer is that we don't have a clue. It's possible that she already owned it, as part of some kind of wealthy family legacy, rather than that she went out and purchased it. This possibility is based on the critique offered: "Why was this ointment not sold and the money given to the poor?" As opposed to the

question—"Why didn't you put that money into the coffers for the poor, rather than going out with it and using it to purchase this ointment?" Which I think would have been the more natural question if it was believed this unnamed woman had that much cash in hand to begin with. See what I'm saying? She may have for whatever reason had access to this nard through her family. Even so, consider this---if you were in possession of a jar of ointment worth around \$20,000 dollars, what would you do with it? Would you sell it, and use the money for some charitable cause or some practical need of your own? Would you hang onto it to use as a nest egg for retirement and to see if it continued to rise in value? Or would you use it when the Spirit moved you to do so, as best as you knew how? Which may well be what this unnamed woman chose to do. Note that in making this choice, she pretty much alone of Jesus' followers is acknowledging two things: His kingship and His imminent death. We already recognized that this over-the-top anointing gesture would happen in the proclamation of a King or in the burial of someone highly placed. Jesus will be crucified as "King of the Jews". And his burial is soon to follow on the heels of his execution by week's end. But no one else is acknowledging this, and Jesus praises her for being the one person who does. "She has done what she could:", he says, "she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial". What a beautiful and extraordinary story.

I would like for us to further understand this beautiful and extraordinary story, by putting ourselves temporarily into the sandals of the three characters here, although one of the characters is plural. But what would it mean for us to be the gathered followers, to be Jesus as recipient, to be the unnamed woman as giver? Let's find out.

The thing that depresses me personally about this approach to the text is that I immediately discover that I can most easily slip into the sandals of the gathered followers. And they're the ones I like least in this story, hands down! But I can relate to those observing and criticizing other people's actions, particularly their fiscal actions. One of the books I read over my Sabbatical highlighted cultural differences between 1<sup>st</sup> C. Palestine and 21<sup>st</sup> C. Americans. Of course there are exceptions, but generally, our culture highly values fiscal responsibility. We are to work hard, to earn our fair wage, to save it, invest it, and manage it responsibly, and to spend it in useful and beneficial ways, generally avoiding blatantly obvious extravagance. We watch our

money, we track our expenditures, we are careful and shrewd with our spending and saving. We are quick to criticize those we consider wasteful, extravagant, or irresponsible in how they handle their money and means. When I was interacting at one time with people on limited incomes, I'd note they had a much larger flat screen TV than I did; I took note. One set of family members bought vehicles for their teen-agers; ours had to work for theirs; I took note. Seeing how some of the rich and famous spend their money now on the most ridiculous, over-the-top luxuries always brings out the critical, frugal Scandinavian-Germanic inner voice for me. Sadly, I really relate to these unlikeable followers of Jesus, don't you? But as the sabbatical reading I was referencing pointed out, *our* money managing values are not particularly the values of 1<sup>st</sup> C. Middle Eastern people, who thought far more collectively and far less individually about money and means. This is still true of a number of cultures today, most of them non-Western cultures. *We* value saving as much as possible for future need; ancient cultures might have wondered why you should be hoarding more than you need if someone else needs it right now? And if that means *you* end up in a position of need at some point, then you would expect that others would assist you with *their* extra. Which may be why the critique in our text was voiced in terms of a concern for the poor. That collective need was important. Jesus though, defends the woman's use of the precious nard. He contends that there are always people in need, they should be with us and we among them, and our capacity to deal generously with them is always a possibility. In other words, Jesus is *not* writing *off* the needs of the poor; he's telling us that fighting poverty is a battle that is ongoing and *always* needs attention. But he's allowing for the heartfelt gesture of love made *now*, in the present moment, while it can be made, and so he defends the woman and corrects those criticizing her. In whose sandals we might easily find ourselves. And what do we learn from standing in those sandals? Maybe that it's not our business to judge and criticize the generosity of others.

What if we dare to step into the sandals of Jesus, even just for a moment? What might we learn? Setting aside issues like His divinity, His mission of sacrifice for the salvation of the world, and a few small things like that, in what capacity do we encounter Jesus in this lesson? I suggest we discover Him as a *recipient*. He is the recipient of this extraordinarily generous and heartfelt devotion, and what kind of a

recipient is He? He is a *gracious* recipient! And you know what? I don't think that most of us are all that good at being gracious recipients. I think relating to Jesus in this role is a bit of a learning curve for us. Because again---what do we value in our present culture? Self-sufficiency. Independence. Pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Standing on our own two feet. We don't always easily and graciously receive largesse from others, do we? Particularly largesse on this scale? What do say? "Oh, you shouldn't have" or "Give it someone who needs it more than I do" or "No thanks, I'm good." Acknowledging gratitude and need often come hard to us. And basically, that means, that God is not as proud as we are. God in Christ warmly receives this woman's over-the-top gift, where we might be too proud, too self-sufficient, to accept it graciously. What do we learn from this stint in Jesus' sandals? Maybe that *receiving graciously* is an important faith skill; not only receiving graciously the mercy of Almighty God, but also receiving graciously the generosity of others.

Finally, what's it like to step into the sandals of this unnamed woman? We know so little about her; she is largely an enigma to us. Here's all we know: she has something of unusual value and she's willing to give it to Jesus, no holds barred. Notice that she doesn't carefully unstop the cork of the jar and pour out a little, saving some for another time. On no. She breaks open the jar and pours the ointment on his head. There's no going back from this. There's nothing being held in reserve. This is not about quantity or measurement for her; this is about making the full-hearted gesture of love and acknowledgement of Who Jesus is for her. Standing in her sandals, I feel inadequate and meager; such actions don't come easily or naturally to me, maybe that's true for many of us. But I love what Jesus says about her—"she has done what she could". He defends her right to make the big-hearted expression of devotion and he affirms her for doing what she could. Maybe that's a helpful thing to remember, rather than beating ourselves up for being less whole-heartedly generous. We live in a different world with different values, and yet.....we also love Jesus. We also love each other. Can we allow ourselves the opportunity to express big-time devotion, in whatever form that might take? Can we also affirm that even though in so many cases, we can never do enough to show love and gratitude, God is pleased when *we do what we can*. Which is what this unnamed woman does in our text this morning. She does what she can, *while* she can. And there's another insight for us: we don't have forever to be generous or loving. We are

mortal. The recipients of our generosity are mortal. Jesus knows the time is limited for this kind of gesture to be made for Him, and He praises her for acting while the opportunity is there. This reminds me of those who might say, “You plan to send flowers to my funeral? Why not send them to me now, so I can enjoy them?”

See where I’m heading here? Why do we delay expressions of love, of devotion, of exuberance? Why do we measure out carefully how much devotion we give to another, even one whom we love dearly, like the old Norwegian who loved his wife so much he almost told her so once? Expressions of love, and devotion even to our Lord, to whom we owe our very lives and salvation? Is it really so important, when it comes to love, to be sparing and careful? Doesn’t this example of the unnamed woman in fact, free us and encourage us to love God and others now, to express it whole heartedly, to risk being vulnerable and brave in our affections, our devotions, and our giving? This woman’s fragrant offering of love continues to present a living memorial to her love for Christ to this day. Maybe we can learn to do likewise, expressing love with generosity and exuberance for those we love, including, and especially, for our Lord. Amen.