

Wesley United Methodist Church      Rev. Beverly E Stenmark  
March 22, 2020  
Entering the Passion of Jesus: Picturing Ourselves in the Story  
Lent 4: The First Dinner: Risking Rejection<sup>i</sup>  
Scripture: Psalm 23  
Mark 14:3-9

This has been another difficult week and we anticipate that next week will be more of the same. We are all focused on how we keep ourselves safe, how we help others stay safe. Groceries stores still seem to be filled with people buying just about anything they can find and not finding some of the things we want. Businesses are trying to figure out how to carry on their work. Here at the church we are continuing to experiment with ways to help us stay connecting even while we are not physically present with each other. We turn to each other and we turn to God looking for help, guidance, peace, and hope.

In the middle of all that, there are an increasing number of funny videos showing up on Facebook and other places. These are not meant, in any way, to diminish or make light of the great concerns around COVID-19. However, they are meant to help us cope with this by sometimes providing a distraction; mental health professionals are even reminding us to take a break. It is not healthy for us to spend all our time watching or reading the very latest news. Within the church we would say, that even while engaging with the news and being responsible, we should also take a sabbath from all the news and concerns.

Sometimes even in the middle of great concerns, it is important to focus on something else for a while. This was the case in the scripture reading that we heard a few minutes ago. In all four gospels there is a story about a woman with an alabaster jar of ointment at a dinner anointing

either Jesus' head or feet. Three of the accounts have this during or near Passover. Three of them do not name the woman, and in three cases someone complained about the ointment being such an extravagance that the money should have been used to help the poor. By the way, the one with a difference is different for each thing I just mentioned.

The differences are not necessarily something we need to be concerned about – remember that the first time that any of these stories were written down was at least 30 to 35 years after Jesus' death. Each of the Gospel writers have a reason for remembering or telling the story the way they did. So, today we are going to focus on Mark's account, which is also the earliest account, the one we believe to be the first one written.

I think the most important parts for us to focus on today are that the woman is not named and that there was concern that the ointment was an extravagant expense and that the money should have been used to help the poor.

In each case the woman does not speak and in case, Jesus speaks up to defend the woman. In the three cases that are set near Passover – Matthew, Mark, and John – the complaint is that the ointment could have been sold and the money used for the poor.

In each case, Jesus tells them that they will always have the poor with them, but that they will not always have him, and she is preparing his body for burial. This is not Jesus being selfish or unfeeling. This is not Jesus giving permission to ignore the poor. This is not about Jesus saying that we can't make a difference, so we don't need to try. This is Jesus helping them sort through two very important priorities.

Helping the poor is an important theme throughout all of scripture. In fact, Jesus was quoting scripture. He was quoting from the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of

Deuteronomy which says, “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 in your land.” (CEB)

Jesus is reminding the people present, and us, that we will always have the opportunity to help the poor – and we should. It doesn’t mean that because there will always be people who are poor or in need, that we can shrug it off or delay our response. It means that we need and should be responding.

However, sometimes two really good things can be in conflict and we have to make decisions after weighing multiple very important priorities. In this case, Jesus says that this woman was making the very important decision to prepare his body for burial. Unlike the disciples who did not understand or did not yet believe what Jesus had been telling them about his upcoming death, this woman did, and she came to prepare his body for burial.

There are people who do not believe that the COVID-19 pandemic is as serious as we are hearing. There are people who believe that it is being blown out of proportion and that coverage is part of a hoax. It is the responsibility of those of us who do believe that this is real to take the actions necessary to help those who are most in need.

This woman came out of her love for Jesus. She took a risk in showing up at this dinner. I believe, typically, in most meals the men would have been in one place and the women in another. This unnamed woman took the risk of being rejected. She entered a room where she was not invited. She heard the men complaining about her actions. She saw their looks of disapproval. She was risking rejection by her very presence.

And yet, she came in with her alabaster jar of expensive nard, and she anointed Jesus. She would have been well aware of his concern for the poor and those who were in need, and yet, she used this very expensive ointment – not to help the poor, but to take care of Jesus.

Remember that when asked, Jesus identified the two most important laws to be to love God with all that we are, and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Where and how are we showing this love, and serving others during this pandemic?

D. L. Mayfield wrote this week that “Loving your neighbor means asking Christians to take extreme precautions – before being legally ordered to do so in order to ensure we as a society don’t have to make choices about who we do or do not prioritize with health care. Christians can be at the forefront of rejecting extreme individualism and lean into a collectivist worldview where each person is seen as made in the image of God and worth protecting at all costs.”<sup>ii</sup>

We can see this happening in small and big ways.

Wes Palmer, a colleague and director of Preacher’s Aid, told about stopping in a small grocery store. Throughout the store, he saw multiple signs saying, “one per customer”. He said the placement of the signs seemed random to him. Among other things, he picked up 5 cans of black olives which he typically uses in his daily salad. When he got to register, the young cashier took four of the cans and almost nervously told him he was only allowed to buy one. He apologized and said he had realized that. She seemed relieved that he didn’t argue with her as apparently customers had been doing all day. Then he thanked her and said that he appreciated her being in the store and staffing the register. Her face lit up.<sup>iii</sup>

It was small but it made a difference to this young woman who is

taking risks being at work.

Grocery stores have started offering an hour or two for more vulnerable customers to shop. From what I'm hearing, these times are still often very busy. When one person on Facebook expressed that she is not able to get to the store during those hours, another responded that she shouldn't be leaving her home at all and offered to do the shopping for her.

These may not seem extravagant like using expensive ointment to anoint Jesus, but they are ways that we can show love and serve those in need. And sometimes we need to be celebrating and having fun even in the middle of a pandemic.

One colleague whose daughter turned 8 this week, took a sabbath from coronavirus focus – while still maintaining appropriate social distancing and precautions. He posted pictures and a video of them singing. People who have never met his daughter were posting birthday wishes to her even though they don't know her. Since they couldn't have a party with her friends, they extended the birthday celebration to a much wider on-line audience.

I said that there were two things I thought were important in this story. The first was that there was concern about the poor and the those in need, how to help them, and why sometimes a different focus is appropriate. The second is that the woman is not named. Yet Jesus praises her actions, and in Mark's gospel says that wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, the story of what she has done will be told in remembrance of her. (Mark 14:9)

Why should this story be told in remembrance of her? Especially since we don't even know her name. I think the answer is simple. She is us. We are her. Everyday we live our lives trying to be faithful. Most of the

actions we take are not ones that will be remembered by the world. We may not ever know the results of many of our actions, but we are like this woman; people who live our lives one day at a time doing the very best that we can. And today, we are doing that in very difficult and unusual circumstances.

There are many ways that we can be of help to others during this difficult time. Some of us can go shopping for people who are not able to shop for themselves. Some of us can work on technology and ways for us to stay in touch so that we can support each other. Some of us can continue to work in places where our physical presence is necessary – grocery stores, pharmacies, doctors' offices, hospitals.

Some of us can continue to provide things that are important to our country and our economy and to do some or all of this work from home while we are socially distancing. Some of us are teachers who are working hard to develop ways to teach children who are at home. Some of us are parents who are trying to work from home while still caring for children or others in our homes.

Even those confined to their homes may be able to help someone else by placing phone calls to another person, setting up a buddy system to check on each other, offering words of comfort and hope to others.

All of us can pray. We don't need fancy words; we just need to talk to God as if we were talking to our best friend. We can pray for those who are most vulnerable, those who are ill, those who are without employment and those who work in critical places. We can pray for scientists who are working overtime to try to identify medications that may be helpful or who are trying to develop a vaccine. We can pray for those in our government who are making difficult decisions that affect all of us.

We can, and must, also take care of ourselves. We should take a sabbath from reading or watching the news from time to time so that we take care of our own mental and emotional health. We can care for our own spiritual health by being intentional about spending time in prayer, taking time to meditate or read devotionals or gathering with others electronically to talk and provide support.

Wherever the good news is told throughout the world, the story of this woman is to be told in remembrance of her and as a reminder to us that we are to do the same, whatever that looks like in our particular context – which right now includes a global pandemic that is an important part of our lives, but it is not the total or only thing happening in our lives. We need to find ways to balance all of this, and God is the one who will guide us in all of this, just as God has always done and always will.

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<sup>i</sup> This sermon includes ideas from Amy-Jill Levine [Entering the Passion of Jesus](#) as well as Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan's book [The Last Week](#). To the best of my knowledge there are no quotes from these sources, but the sermon has been influenced by their books. The sermon title is from the Worship Design Studio Lenten Series.

<sup>ii</sup> Mayfield, D.L. "American Individualism vs. Loving Your Neighbor" in Sojourners Post.

<sup>iii</sup> Palmer, Wes. Posted on Facebook sometime during the week of 3/16-21.