

Today we're on Wednesday of Holy Week- two days before Passover- a day or two from Jesus' betrayal and arrest. With the help of Jewish NT scholar, A.J. Levine, we continue to follow Jesus on his way to the cross. Today's story involves **the unnamed woman who anointed Jesus in preparation for his burial and how she risks rejection, among many other things**. All four Gospels offer a story of Jesus being anointed with perfume by a woman. And all except for Luke have the setting of the story in Bethany, which was about two miles east of Jerusalem. 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, Matthew and John's versions 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.**

This Spring I was nominated and chosen to participate in the Diversity Leadership [Initiative](#) (DLI) with the Riley Institute at Furman. This week while on AnMed's campus for my monthly class, we were discussing pay inequity among genders as well as race, etc. There was a male leader who said that we don't have pay inequity today, especially with women. You could have cut the tension in the room with a knife. Talk about uncomfortable? I leaned over to a female colleague and without saying a word I showed her my necklace that a dear friend had recently given me. It reads, "Well-behaved women rarely make history." She

nodded and smiled as if to say, “You can see why!” I also learned that *The New York Times* began in 2018 to run obituaries of [women](#) who have made remarkable contributions to history, politics, and culture. Since 1851, *The New York Times* has published thousands of obituaries, the vast majority chronicled were the lives of men, mostly white ones. No, the obituaries of women originally did not run in *The Times*, yet their stories are just as extraordinary as the ones that did appear. The series begins “Obituary writing is more about life than death: the last word, a testament to a human contribution. Yet who gets remembered- and how- inherently involved judgment” (Levine, *Entering the Passion of Jesus*). At the end of today’s biblical story Jesus says, “wherever the good news is announced, her story should be told as well.” In other words, when you tell Jesus’ story, we must tell her story too. Have we done that? I find it fascinating that this text isn’t in the revised common lectionary, the selections of texts for three year cycles. No. It is found during Passion or Holy Week and rarely preached on. We need to remember this unnamed woman, who in many of the guests’ eyes gathered around Simon’s table, was probably labeled as misbehaving or causing a disturbance.

Can you imagine reclining around the table when without warning an unnamed- probably unknown- woman enters the room carrying an alabaster vase and heads straight towards Jesus? Somebody call security! 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 male leaders 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 ointment had in it "nard" or spikenard, which is an ointment made from a plant native to India, in the Himalayan regions. Mark tells us that it was "pure," that is, of high quality and very expensive. 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; Jesus did. Who was this woman? What can we learn from this outsider? Was she wealthy or was the jar of perfume all she had to her name? We aren't told much about her at all. Much like my class this week, I imagine you could've cut the tension in Simon's house with a knife. The silence didn't last long, as some people began complaining and talking about her 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 scold her. Judge her. Shame 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? Sparing? 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).

No one could have prepared me for the backlash a few months ago on social media over the Greenville Homeless Alliance mural: Seen, Heard & Valued. Over a FB post in a Native Greenville group, the opinions came flooding in. Even though Triune paid no money toward the mural and this sanctuary building is not historical, some people complained. "Triune has lost their mission. They are wasting money on graffiti instead of taking care of the poor." "How dare you deface the house of the Lord?" "Well of course it has to be rainbow colors...right in your face!" "The money that was used to paint that awful thing on the side of the historical building should've been better used somewhere else like feeding the homeless." And the complaints went on and on, as did the positive comments. Dan Weathers, a member of Triune who is featured on the mural, courageously posted this response, "I am one of the 8 people in the mural. I might be biased but as a Greenville native that found myself on the streets 7 years ago. I reached out for help in THE RIGHT WAY! I asked the people that fight this fight everyday what to do, and I listened to what they said. I am now a cancer survivor and work two jobs. Have provided my own housing (even through chemo.) 2 and a half years cancer free and giving back to the community that helped me so greatly! Give your time, money, whatever you want to donate to these valuable treasures of our community. They helped save my life! I am walking breathing proof that homelessness can happen to anyone and it can be overcome. Greenville ... I love you!" My predecessor, Rev. Deb Richardson-Moore posted, "GHA managed to feature some of the beautiful faces of real people who turned their lives around with help from Greenville's homeless service providers. The nature of art is that no one is going to love every piece -- especially every public art piece. But Nick Burns' creation is an authentic and genuine depiction of life in

that corner of our city. I hope you will join me in celebrating it.” Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and I have come to embrace the negative comments- almost as much as the positive ones- as the purpose of GHA’s mural is to pique curiosity and foster conversation involving the stories of hope of people who have and are experiencing homelessness, addiction, and/or mental illness.

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 stands up for 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 chose to receive her gift of love. This loving act of devotion stands in stark contrast to the sinister plot developing around Jesus. This unnamed woman is embalming the body that Judas, the betrayer, will deliver to Roman officials. 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? 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. Note that this is in the present, not future tense. A possible paraphrase might be: “You are not lacking in opportunities to help the poor, so go ahead and get to work.” Jesus’ words are another sign of Jesus’ impending death, and this woman seems to be the only one in the room to recognize his 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). 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.** “Think about it this way: in times of peril, pain, or trouble in your own life, what has comforted you the most? 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. 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. "Without using words, she 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*, J. Gonzalez, 3/13/19).

Jesus says this woman "has done what she could. She has anointed his body ahead of time for burial" (v.8). She has done what she could, and it was enough. It was a gift. This unnamed woman couldn't save Jesus from the shadows of the cross, but in anointing Jesus she declares that the stench of death will NOT have the last word in our lives; the sweet and sacred fragrance of love does and will. "She is a standing rebuke to all who believe that faithfulness means joylessness, that justice and beauty must be rivals"(Hollyday). **This woman risks a lot for such**

a simple- yet profound- gesture of love. What risks are you willing to take to pour out love? Are you willing to risk rejection? Jesus doesn't say the disciples will be remembered wherever the gospel is preached. He says we're to remember her. Because she represents God's grace. Keep telling her story-not just in Women's History month- but when you share the gospel. Love poured out...is a beautiful and vulnerable and holy thing. The time is short. The cross awaits. "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.