

Sermon for Sunday, March 24, 2024—Palm Sunday

Mark 14:3-9

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Today's Scripture readings are a study in contrasts. On the one hand we have a crowd of people joyfully shouting and praising Jesus as he enters Jerusalem. They are waving branches and publicly proclaiming, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!"

Contrasting with this public display is the story of a woman entering a home where a meal is taking place. This is a private setting, not a raucous parade on a public street. While we don't know the size of the guest list for this meal; it's safe to assume that the disciples are present and perhaps a few others. There are no loud proclamations; no shouts of hosanna; the woman isn't quoted as saying anything; she simply breaks open the jar and pours it on Jesus' head.

From our modern perspective her actions seem quite bizarre, but not so much 2000 years ago. In Bible times anointing the head with oil was something that was done to signify a person's royal status: in the Old Testament both Saul and David were anointed with oil by the prophet Samuel. Samuel's anointing signified that that these two men were destined to be kings of Israel. And that's exactly what happened to them.

In the first of today's Scripture readings we have a crowd announcing the onset of a return to the kingdom of David. They are looking for a king; for someone to save them from the Romans. While the Palm Sunday entrance into Jerusalem doesn't lead to an insurrection placing Jesus at the head of the government, it does put the religious authorities on high alert.

For the next few days Jesus goes in and out of the city several times. He is often at the Temple and several of his teachings are recorded in the gospel. The religious authorities are looking for an excuse to arrest him because they fear him, his teachings, and his power. As Jesus travels in and out of the city he does so publicly. The crowds have a deep appreciation for his teaching and the presence of the crowds prevents him from being arrested.

In the second reading from Mark 14 Jesus is outside of Jerusalem in the village of Bethany. He is sitting at a table eating when an unnamed woman anoints him with a bottle of expensive perfume. Some, remembering the kingly anointing of the Old Testament, might have thought that she is effectively anointing him to be king of Israel. Ironically, following his trial in front of Pilate Jesus is given a crown and a purple cloak: both symbols of royal status. Of course the crown was made of thorns and the cloak placed upon his shoulders was only temporarily. Both were used as instruments of mockery not as signs of royal status.

Returning to the unnamed woman that anoints Jesus. Over the last 2000 years many have conflated (or mixed together into one) the identities of two women named in the gospels. Some have thought that the woman who anoints Jesus in today's reading is Mary Magdalene. But the author of Mark's gospel is well aware of Mary Magdalene's identity. He names her specifically as a witness to Jesus' death on the cross and later names her as one who goes to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body after the Sabbath. If Mary Magdalene had been the one who did the anointing at the dinner the gospel writer would have said so. But he does not. This anonymous woman is simply a follower of Jesus who wishes to honor him.

The comments of the disciples about what they consider to be the woman's wasteful action are comments that are easy to imagine coming out of our own mouths. Sometimes it's just TOO easy to turn to criticism as we observe other people's actions and choices. If we are honest with ourselves we must admit how quickly we turn to judgment when we observe someone doing something that we would never consider; something that we might describe as outrageous.

This unnamed woman spent a year's wages on a bottle of perfume and poured the entire thing on Jesus' head. It could be taken as an exceedingly foolish action. But it is an action taken to honor and worship God.

Blessed be Jesus: he has an expansive mind. He is able to recognize her action as an action done out of love and reverence. And he names it publicly so as to impress upon those present and upon us who read of it much later just that: this extravagance is done out of love. Blessed be Jesus, the one who is always making room for people to express "extravagant love."

We don't know what the woman was thinking nor do we know her rationale. We only have the words of Jesus when he describes her act as "a good service." Our best guess is that she anoints him out of love and reverence; perhaps out of a belief that he is God's Son; maybe as an act of worship. She has no way of knowing what is going to happen to Jesus over the next few days. But of course, Jesus knows; and he interprets her action as one that prepares his body for burial...an ultimate act of devotion. He has predicted his death three times in this gospel. And sure enough, there is no time for his body to be properly prepared for burial—no time for it to be anointed in an honorable manner as befitting the Savior of the world.

In conclusion: Jesus has a way of taking some of the smallest and simplest of acts and reinterpreting them into acts of great value.

- Honoring this woman's extravagant act when she pours ointment on his head.
- Eating bread and drinking wine.
- Splashing someone with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

These are simple earthly actions that become sacraments. Simple earthly actions that connect us with God. Simple earthly actions that bring us forgiveness, life, and salvation.

The unnamed woman doesn't act as she does to get on Jesus' good side. In the same way simple acts of devotion on your part are not a requirement to get on God's good side. They are actions taken out of love for God and out of a recognition of all that God has done for us.

Today isn't just Palm Sunday, it is the first day of Holy Week. The many worship services that we hold this week have just one primary point: to remember everything that Jesus did for us and attempt to honor him. "For by grace you have been saved by faith, and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God." All is grace my friends. Your salvation is a freely given gift from God's Son. And we will remember that this week. Amen.