

“It’s Nothing If It Costs Nothing”

Palm Sunday

Mark 14:1-19

April 5, 2020

Today we move beyond the Palm Sunday experience and stop at the first scene of Mark’s passion story. We won’t actually walk through the whole passion story this morning – I encourage you to check our website on Friday and watch our Good Friday service there. Through that service we’ll tell the whole Passion story as we extinguish candles and ask the question, “Were you there?” But today we stop in this place - because I think Mark wants us to stop here. We pause for a moment to be prepared for something.

Simon, the man healed of leprosy, is hosting a gathering at his home. He’s invited Jesus and some friends -

- perhaps he wants to tell others about how Jesus healed him
- perhaps he just wants to create some space away for Jesus

Whatever the case, he has hosted a dinner in Bethany for Jesus.

Into what is most likely a restful scene of men reclined at the table a woman breaks in. We don’t know where she has come from. Nor do we know who she is, at least as Mark tells the story. And we don’t know why she’s there...at least at first. But we learn very quickly.

The woman comes to make an extravagant sacrifice to Jesus: “an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard.” Scholars think that would be about a year’s worth of salary...I’ll wait while you do the math...a year’s worth of salary.

This jar that would have been the woman’s security. It would have been her 401K and Roth IRA all in one little jar. It would have been very precious to her future. But nevertheless she takes it and breaks it open. And without missing a beat, she pours it over Jesus’ head.

What was she thinking? This woman’s gift to Jesus is extravagant. It is excessive and senseless. I’m not even sure the woman knows the full meaning of her act. She just has an extravagant love for Jesus.

Perhaps because she has either witnessed or received such love from Jesus - and out of the depths of herself - she pours this costly gift. It was likely a surprise to her to hear Jesus say that she was preparing his body for burial. She simply offers a sacrifice to Jesus - and her sacrifice is extravagant.

Those gathered around the table are a little put out. Doesn’t that happen when someone wants to be generous? We think we could give away their money in more sensible ways. We think we could spend more prudently, so we can be a little put out by the extravagance of others.

The people at the dinner are put out, too. *Why was the ointment wasted in this way?* They are confused and questioning. They think they could have made a better use of the woman's gift. Sell it, they thought - sell it and give the money to the poor. Now that sounds logical, and giving, doesn't it? Isn't that what Jesus would do?

Unlike John's version of the story, there are no alternative motives. They just see what amount of money they could have gotten for that jar of ointment. They knew what kind of good work they could do for the poor with that amount of money. Imagine the kind of good you could do giving away a year's worth of your salary?

But what Jesus wants us to pay attention to is the extravagant sacrifice of the woman. "The poor will always be with us," he says. In other words, we will always have opportunities to serve the poor. We can do it anytime we wish. The question is will we do it? But Jesus wants us to notice the woman's *extravagant, sacrificial* gift. That, I think, is why Mark wants us to stop here.

Mark locates the story here on purpose. It's two days before Passover. It is the last event Mark records before the events of the passion begin to unfold. Mark places it here to prepare us for what follows.

It seems as though Mark is inviting us to ask the questions people asked around the table of the events yet to come:

- ✓ Why this irrational waste?
- ✓ Why this extravagant sacrifice?
- ✓ Why this squandering of the life of Jesus?

The questions will haunt us as we walk through the events of Holy Week. Straight through to Good Friday we will be asking "Why this waste?"

Many have tried to answer these questions of Why

- ✓ to find an answer
- ✓ to explain the sacrifice of the cross
- ✓ to calculate the mathematics of the atonement
- ✓ to weave together some rational explanation for this irrational extravagance of God

Mark locates the story of the woman here to remind us that sometimes the search for a rational explanation is misguided. Mark is preparing us to experience the gift of Jesus' sacrificial love on the cross. This extravagant, self-surrender that is beyond reason:

- ✓ the cross means that Jesus was willing to pay any price
- ✓ the cross means that Jesus was willing to go to any length
- ✓ the cross means that Jesus was willing to do anything necessary to accomplish the work of salvation
- ✓ the cross means that Jesus was willing to do anything to save us
- ✓ the cross means that Jesus is willing to do anything to fulfill the radical renovation that God intends for our lives

But not only is Mark preparing us to experience the gift of the cross, Mark is also preparing us to respond to the *extravagant* gift of the cross, to offer ourselves in *extravagant* surrender to the One who sacrificed *extravagantly* for us. The only appropriate response to God's gift on the cross is to offer ourselves the way the woman did, to give ourselves in *unrestrained, extravagant* obedience to Jesus. Mark invites us to go beyond rational calculation -

- to give without counting the costs
- to surrender without planning out all the details
- to respond to the extravagant grace of God at the cross

In this "stay at home" season in Minnesota we are being asked to sacrifice - And it's hitting us Methodists hard! I mean, do we know how to be Methodist without a potluck!

But this is my favorite "stay at home" meme: Let's not mess this up folks!

We are being asked to sacrifice for real, though:

- we are sacrificing plans with friends
- we are sacrificing special gatherings for special events – it was my mom's 80th birthday yesterday and we had to cancel both versions of her party
- we are sacrificing our personal indulgences like hair care, nail care, massages, eating out
- we are sacrificing the daily routines we have become accustomed to
- and parents and grandparents are sacrificing some of our parental free time in order to be hands-on with our children's education and at-home time

We don't make these sacrifices out of a love for just ourselves. As people of faith we sacrifice out of our love for God which always translates into a love for God's children. We make sacrifices for the vulnerable, the outcast, the forgotten and the hurting. We stay at home and sacrifice

- For all the children
- For our elderly neighbors and relatives
- For God's people who are immune compromised
- And also so that we can remain healthy to care for others

Sacrificing is an act of love, first for God, and second for God's children.

As you come to this Holy Week

- as you navigate your "stay at home reality"
- as you stand before the awe of the cross on Good Friday
- as you wait in vigil in the darkness and emptiness of the tomb
- as you prepare to mark Easter in ways we never have before

May you leave room for God's extravagant gift to radically renovate your life.
May you find a way to respond in extravagant, unrestrained sacrifice to God.

Amen.