A Beautiful Thing

Mark 14:1-11 Michael Lanier

KV 6 “Leave her alone,” said Jesus. “Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me.”

 Today’s passage that we just read is the story of the anointing of Jesus prior to his burial. I gave a message on this chapter several years ago at a summer bible conference in Carlinville. I don’t quite remember exactly what I said- and I have never given a message over the same passage twice so this is a somewhat new experience. Nevertheless, I believe from what I remember that my main point was that what the woman did for Jesus was beautiful- and that the disciple’s response was rational, albeit misguided. On the first point I still agree, but on the second I have come to understand their response differently as I will explain. Before I discuss that I wish to pause to discuss where we are in relation to the whole gospel.

Jesus Marches Towards Death

 If you recall from way back in Mark 8:31, Jesus claims he will be killed by the teachers of the law. In chapter 14:1-2 we see that the teachers of the law and the chief priests have accelerated their plans to kill Jesus. We read that they are scheming to kill him, but they wished to avoid killing Jesus on the week of Passover. Passover was a festival that God ordained in Exodus chapter 12. Exodus 12:26 “And when your children ask you, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you?’ then tell them, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.” Jews were to eat no leavened bread, symbolizing the haste with which they escaped slavery. Jews were also to do no work. The entire week was observed as though the Sabbath. This meant that Jews were not to bake, sheer wool, sew, tan hide, build, kindle a fire, transport objects, or even writing. The festival was to be solemn remembrance of the God’s mercy. Jesus had become popular and executing a popular rabbi in such a week would threaten a riot. Moreover, the teachers of the law were basically out of time. The Sanhedrin’s regulation in the Mishna, a book of extra biblical rules and commentaries, indicates that the Sanhedrin could not convict of a capital offense on the same day evidence was heard “as perhaps over the course of the night one of the judges will think of a reason to acquit the defendant.” (Sanhedrin 17a:20) The Passover regulation specified that Jews must attend a Seder. What is often called Passover today has its origins in two ancient observances. Nissan 14 was the Passover as mentioned in the Torah; at this time, an offering to the Lord, the sacrifice of a lamb, was slaughtered during the afternoon and prepared. Nissan 15 (the new day starting at sundown) was the beginning of the seven-day Festival of Unleavened Bread. On this start of Nissan 15, the Passover lamb that had been sacrificed and prepared on Nissan 14 (that same afternoon) was eaten that night (now Nissan 15), along with unleavened bread. Over time, the Festival of Unleavened Bread commonly became known as “Passover” and is usually considered as starting at sundown between Nissan 14 and Nissan 15. Executing Jesus was running up against some timeline issues if they wanted to do it in this week while keeping their Passover requirements. The point of all this is that the Jews while plotting to assassinate the son of God, but their regulations were making it difficult. Nevertheless, as we see here but also in Mark 14:53- they don’t really care too much about these things. They only care about causing a political situation with their Roman occupiers. It is a very typical mark of evil people to use the law to bind people in the daylight, while letting themselves be unfettered when nobody watched. Jesus says they are hypocrites and white washed tombs, and there is no greater display of this than openly plotting to kill the son of God during the observance of your deliverance out of slavery at his hand, breaking the laws you claim to follow.

The Anointing At Bethany

And so Jesus marches towards his death. After this Jesus has his last supper, the seder mentioned before. And then he will be arrested, but on trial and crucified. This story now of his anointing has a very critical moment. The last kind act that Jesus will ever witness in his human life will happen here. Jesus is relining in the home of Simon the Leper when a woman enters the house. She breaks an alabaster jar of expensive perfume and pours it over Jesus. The perfume here was nard. Nard came from the seeds of a flower grown in the mountains of the Himalayas. The passage says that this was an entire years’ worth of wages. Scholars believe this would have been typically used either as a dowery or for the preparation of the burial of the woman. Others believe that it may have been passed down in the family as an inheritance. Regardless, we shouldn’t see it as purely perfume. This woman was pouring out her future for Jesus. This was her security. This was her “No matter what happens, at least I got this Nard to help me so I don’t end up destitute.” And in one act its all gone. The text says she “broke the jar”. All of it is given to Jesus. Cs Lewis in the Screwtape Letters says that men build contingencies to all sorts of imaginary hypotheticals. These securities can honeycomb their way through a man, and make his total commitment to God itself hallow. After all, if we rely on all our material possessions what is God to us? But we see nothing of the sort with this woman though. She gives everything to Jesus, with no reservations. In many ways this reminds me of Isaiah 53:12 “he poured out his life unto death”. “he” being the messiah. The woman in this story does not die, but she pours out her future and everything she has onto Jesus. In the same way that we often say a man has a “good life” if he was a lot of possessions, you might say she “poured out her life unto Jesus”. And Jesus sees her devotion as beautiful.

The Disciple’s Reaction

 But the disciples react harshly towards her. Lets look at verse 5 *It could have been sold for more than a year’s wages[**a**] and the money given to the poor.” And they rebuked her harshly.* So not only has the woman poured out everything she owns, but she suffers social ridicule for her actions. Now at the start of the message I mentioned that when I initially preached on this passage, I said the disciples’ actions were rational if misguided. I have come to revise this opinion. For two reasons, first their claim amounts to a charge of misguided fanaticism. JC Ryle wrote in the 19th century that “The spirit of these narrow-minded fault-finders is unhappily only too common. Their followers and successors are to be found in every part of Christ’s visible church. There is never wanting a generation of people who decry what they call "extremes" in religion, and are incessantly recommending what they term "moderation" in the service of Christ. If a man devotes his time, money, and affections to the pursuit of worldly things, they do not blame him. If he gives himself up to the service of money, pleasure, or politics, they find no fault. But if the same man devotes himself, and all he has, to Christ, they can scarcely find words to express their sense of his folly. "He is beside himself." "He is out of his mind." "He is a fanatic." "He is an enthusiast." "He is righteous over-much." "He is an extreme man." In short, they regard it as "waste."” If Jesus who he said he is, then the devotion of the woman is rational. It is irrational to give to the poor here. Jesus’ response “Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them anytime you want. But you will not always have me.” This is not a new teaching from Jesus. In fact, it is nearly a direct quote from Deuteronomy 15:11 “There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore, I command you to be openhanded to and your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.” The disciple’s response stands in contrast, they did not see Jesus with the same eyes as the woman. They did not see him as the Messiah, as God. If they, had they would have commended the woman. Further, in John’s gospel we are given more of the story where we find that Judas Iscariot was leading the charge against her. He was very interested in this because he was stealing money from the disciples. So of course, he would have wished the perfume sold. Later we see this same man sell Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. His action stands in stark contrast to the woman of this passage. She gave him her future. Judas gave Jesus us for the equivalent of $197.40.

You Will Not Always Have Me

 What really struck me about this passage was verse “But you will not always have me.” Last year my brother died and when someone close dies it the reality of this verse comes true. All of us have limited time and we will not always have everyone. We grow accustom to people being with us day in and day out as the disciples surely did with Jesus. But Jesus knew his death was coming soon. “But you will not always have me.” Feels a mixture of sadness and anger. Sadness that he would leave his disciples, and anger at their insensitivity. Jesus had told them he would die after all. This was not news. The bible doesn’t say if the woman knew that Jesus was going to die. But either way it demonstrates the simple idea that all of our actions, no matter how small or large- can unknowingly touch someone. I wonder how the woman felt when she learned that Jesus had died? Would she be happy, knowing that she had given everything to Jesus to make his last days special? When my brother died someone told me “You did your best. And at the end of the day that’s all anyone can do.” Maybe she felt guilty she could have done more? But of course, she couldn’t. She gave everything, and that’s all she could give. And Jesus says that she will be remembered forever more for it. As she has done, so are we called to do. “Though rich he became poor so that through his poverty we might become rich.” There is a richness beyond money, and that is what we have learned today. It is without a doubt that she found riches beyond all imagining when she met Jesus again. This is the gospel promise to us, that there are riches beyond anything this world can offer- and they are found exclusively in Jesus Christ. May God give us the eyes of Christ, so that we may devote ourselves fully, each day drawing near to his grace and mercy. Amen.