

"THE LAST WEEK: WEDNESDAY"
Mark 14:1-11
March 14, 2021
York Center Church of the Brethren
Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

It is Wednesday - smack dab in the middle of the last week in the life of Jesus. Each day of this week leads him- and us- closer to the cross.

On Sunday, his anti-imperial parade into the holy city of Jerusalem evoked great enthusiasm among the common people. The Roman government and the religious leaders? Not so much.

On Monday, he quoted from the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah- condemning those who turned God's house into a safe house for robbers- as he overturned the exploitation of the poor in the Temple.

On Tuesday, he spent most of the day in conflict with the religious authorities.

After five attempts, on their part, to make him look foolish with ridiculous arguments, he had them backed into such a tight theological corner they couldn't even turn around. The last thing he said to his disciples on Tuesday was, "Keep Awake!"

Now we find ourselves on Wednesday with two stories before us- the story of a believer framed by the story of a traitor. Mark told us way back in chapter three that the religious leaders began to conspire to kill Jesus. Their conspiracy finally comes to fruition on Wednesday. Even with all of their religious authority and their support from the powers in Rome- they feared the response of the crowds who seemed to love Jesus. So, they looked for a way to secretly arrest him- someplace far away from the crowds who might try to protect him or even turn against them.

Three times on Tuesday Mark told us that the religious leaders were afraid of the crowd. And here is why. Jewish pilgrims from all over the world were in Jerusalem for the celebration of Passover which, according to Jewish law, could only be commemorated in the holy city. It was a time of remembering and celebrating God's act in saving their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. It was also a time of anticipation as they waited for the day they would finally be free of their Roman oppressors.

During this week, the Jewish population of the city increased by five times the normal population. Can you see why the religious and government authorities were on edge? Can you understand their fear of an uprising? The political and religious stakes were very, very

high. Those in power- especially the Jewish leaders- had an awful lot to lose if they lost control of the crowd.

Here in chapter 14, on Wednesday, the story of the conspiracy is interrupted by a very different story, one of love and devotion. Jesus is in Bethany, the town where he and the disciples have been staying, two miles from Jerusalem. He is having dinner at the home of Simon. Mark tells us an important detail about this man. Simon is a leper. This is quite surprising. Mark doesn't say Simon **used** to be a leper, or that Jesus had healed him of leprosy. Mark calls him, "Simon the leper." Today that might be like saying the man had AIDS, a terribly contagious, disfiguring disease. It was bad enough that Jesus was eating with a leper, it was even worse that he was in Simon's home. But the biggest offense was yet to come.

While the men were eating- and of course- only men would have been invited- a woman entered the room and poured expensive perfume on Jesus's head. Talk about a conversation stopper!

This unnamed woman approached Jesus, broke open an expensive alabaster jar, and anointed Jesus with nard, a rare perfume imported from India. It was an extravagant luxury. She emptied the entire jar on him.

When the men finally found their voices, they were furious! Her presence and her actions were outrageous, and they let her know it. They scolded the woman, complaining that she had wasted a very costly perfume. "We could have sold this jar for over three hundred denarii and used the money to help the poor." The yearly wage for a farm worker was three hundred denarii. It was a huge sum of money. In their eyes she had wasted it. But Jesus, of course, saw things differently.

"Leave her alone!" he said. "Why are you giving her such a hard time? She has done something wonderful for me!"

All of those gathered in Simon's house knew the significance of anointing. In their scriptures anointing was a sign of holiness, of royalty; it was a ritual for healing, and it was used to mark someone for God's service as a priest or a king. It was also used to prepare a body for burial. Instead of focusing on the meaning of her extravagant act, though, they condemned her and hid behind a questionable concern for the poor.

In her commentary on Mark, Bethany Seminary professor, Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, writes: *"Jesus explains that they will have ample opportunity to give to the poor and that her good and beautiful service to him is entirely appropriate. She recognizes his impending death and anoints him for burial, whereas they neither recognize his messianic purpose nor the importance of long-term ministry to the poor they are called to fulfill."* (1)

Despite traveling with Jesus for three years. Despite hearing him say three times that he will be killed- the disciples still don't get it. When he has told them how this will end, they have reacted with either incomprehension or outright opposition. But somehow, this woman knew. She knew that Jesus was going to die and she responds in a way that none of his closest friends did- with compassion. We will learn later that after his death, Jesus was buried so quickly that there was no time to perform the anointing ritual for the dead.

Unlike Judas, she performs her actions openly, in public; she does not gain financially, but in fact gives generously to Jesus; her tender behavior reveals her deep devotion to Jesus in body and soul in contrast to Judas's traitorous kiss.

In the biblical story, how often did anyone minister to Jesus? How often was he welcomed with lavish, audacious generosity? Throughout his ministry, how many times have we seen someone give to Jesus instead of taking from him? It is not very often. And he recognized pure generosity when he saw it. He recognized deep love when he felt it.

Jesus tells those who are berating her, *"She has done what she could."* An expression only found in Mark's Gospel. This unnamed woman couldn't save Jesus from what was ahead, she couldn't stop what was already in motion, so she did what she could, she anointed him for his burial.

Mark doesn't tell us how she knew what was coming but somehow, she knew. And she acted on it. In front of a room full of men who didn't want her there. In a place where she wasn't welcome. She performed an act of such brave, lavish generosity that we still remember her, as Jesus said we would. *"Wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."*

There are only two uses of this phrase, "in remembrance" in the New Testament. The first is what Jesus says about this woman in both Matthew's and Mark's Gospels. The second is in Luke's Gospel when Jesus says it about himself during the Last Supper. *"He took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body which is given for you. **Do this in remembrance of me.**"* Paul repeats these instructions in his first letter to the Corinthians.

Jesus honored her when he said, *"What she has done will be told in remembrance of her."*

In their book, *THE LAST WEEK*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan write this about her: *" She alone, of all those who heard Jesus's three prophecies of his death and resurrection, believed him and drew the obvious conclusion. 'Since you are going to die and rise, I must anoint you now beforehand, because I will never have a chance to do it afterward.' She is, for Mark, the first believer. She is, for us, the first Christian. And she*

believed from the word of Jesus before any discovery of an empty tomb. The unnamed woman represents the perfect disciple-leader and is contrasted with Judas, who represents the worst one possible." (2)

Here is what I find really frustrating about Mark's account of the betrayal- Mark gives us absolutely no motive for Judas's betrayal of Jesus. None.

Matthew's Gospel suggests his motive was greed. In John's Gospel Jesus knew when he chose Judas to be a disciple that he would betray him, and Jesus blames the devil. Luke's Gospel blames Satan.

Mark focuses, not on motive, but on identity. Judas was one of The Twelve. For Borg and Crosson, to be one of the Twelve Disciples in Mark's story, is to be a total failure. In this Gospel the disciples never get it, they don't understand Jesus- even when he explains things several times- they question him, argue with him, and fall asleep when he asks them to stay awake. Borg & Crosson say of Judas, "*His betrayal is simply the worst example of how those closest to Jesus failed him dismally in Jerusalem.*" (3)

This story shows us those who had everything and gave Jesus nothing in contrast to one person who gave Jesus everything in one beautiful and prophetic gesture. She gave him grace, pure, amazing, generous grace. Her detractors said she was wasteful. Jesus said she was faithful.

And so Wednesday ends and the diabolical plot has been set in motion.

This story makes me wonder- how often have we been wasteful for Jesus?

What extravagant, gracious, audacious, lavish act of faith have we performed in his name?

It was on the Wednesday
that they called him a waster.

The place smelt like the perfume counter
at a department store.
It was as if somebody had bumped their elbow
against a bottle
and sent it crashing to the floor,
setting off the most expensive stink bomb on earth.

But it happened in a house,
not a shop.

And the woman who broke the bottle
was no casual afternoon shopper.
She was an uninvited, unwelcome guest,
giving away the most precious thing she had.

And he sat still
while she poured the liquid all over his head...
fragrant, luxurious, cool,
unnecessary.

And those who smelt it,
and those who saw it,
and those who remembered
that he was against extravagance,
called him a waster.

They forgot
that he was also the poorest of the poor.

And they who had much
and who have given him nothing,
objected to the one giving him everything.

Jealousy was in the air
when a bold woman's generosity
became an embarrassment to their tight-fistedness...

That was on the Wednesday,
when they called him a waster. (4)

Amen.

End Notes:

- *PREACHING THE GOSPEL OF MARK: PROCLAIMING THE POWER OF God*, Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, Westminster John Knox Press. 2008. P.232.
- *THE LAST WEEK: THE DAY-BY-DAY ACCOUNT OF JESUS'S FINAL WEEK IN JERUSALEM*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. Harper San Francisco. 2006. Pp. 104, 105.
- Borg & Crosson, p. 107.
- Adapted from *STAGES ON THE WAY: WORSHIP RESOURCES FOR LENT, HOLY WEEK, AND EASTER*, Wild Goose Worship Group, Wild Good Publications. 2015. Pp. 99-100.